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Allegiances

SHADOWCLAN

Leader: Stormstar - Dark gray tabby tom with green eyes.

Deputy: Depthwater - Very dark blue-gray tom with a lighter front left paw, dark blue eyes.

Medicine cat: Hawkfeather - Spotted brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Dewpaw

Warriors

Bluerain - Light blue gray speckled she-cat with blue eyes.

Apprentice, Flamepaw

Crowmask - Black tom with amber eyes.

Ashcloud - Dark gray and white tom with pale green eyes.

Silverblossom - Silver spotted she-cat with ice blue eyes.

Apprentice, Copperpaw

Maplefur - Creamy tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Diamondpaw

Rosebreeze - Creamy ginger tabby she-cat with pale amber eyes.

Milkblaze - White tom with creamy points, pale yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Timberpaw

Cougarfoot - Golden brown tom with a white muzzle, black ear tips and tail tip, amber eyes.

Cliffshade - Dark brown and gray tom with a white underbelly, yellow eyes.

Cobratail - Mottled dark red and black tabby tom with amber eyes.

Apprentice, Poisoned Sap

Poppywing - Light red-brown tabby she-cat with light blue eyes.

Rainheart - Light gray tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Bloomfire - Orange she-cat with white paws, muzzle, and chin, dark ginger ears.

Apprentices

Dewpaw - Spotted gray tom with yellow eyes. The medicine cat apprentice.

Diamondpaw - Silver gray she-cat with darker spots, white chest, muzzle, and chin, ice blue eyes.

Flamepaw - Ginger tabby tom with green eyes.

Copperpaw - Dark golden ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Timberpaw - Dark brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Poisoned Sap - Dark golden she-cat with dark brown muzzle, throat, and nose blaze, black ears, paws, and tail tip, amber eyes. Formerly a rogue.

Queens

Sunflower - Ginger tabby she-cat with yellow eyes. Mother to Depthwater's kits:

Blackkit - Black tom with yellow eyes.

Brownkit - Brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Snakekit - Brown tabby and white tom with green eyes.

(foster kits)

Deserve - Black tom with white paws, emerald green eyes.

Boost - Brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Song - White she-cat with light blue eyes.

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Greenpine - Brown tabby she-cat with green eyes. Expecting Ashcloud's kits.

Elders

Buzzardglare- Dark brown tabby tom with one blind eye, yellow eyes.

Foxshine - Ginger she-cat with yellow eyes.

Carrottail - Orange tabby tom with yellow eyes.

WINDCLAN

Leader: Gladestar - Light golden yellow tabby she-cat with pale greenish yellow eyes.

Deputy: Monarchwing - Orange she-cat with black spots and ear tips, golden yellow muzzle, chin, nose blaze, chest, and tail tip, darker orange paws, yellowish green eyes.

Medicine Cat: Silverberry - Silver she-cat with a darker front left paw, tail tip, and right ear, green eyes.

Apprentice, Starpaw

Warriors:

Wetbelly - Dark gray tabby tom with a black underbelly, blue eyes.

Featherblaze -Pale ginger tabby she-cat with a white chest, amber

eyes.

Apprentice, Sharppaw

Darkstorm - Black tom with green eyes.

Thunderjolt - Broad shouldered black and white tom with silver stripes and amber eyes.

Firetail - Orange tom with a red tail and ears, yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Blazingpaw

Soakedears - Very dark gray tom with black ears and paws, dark green eyes.

Apprentice, Scorchpaw

Icetail - White tom with amber eyes.

Jaggedear - Brown tabby tom with a torn left ear, green eyes.

Apprentice, Tornadopaw

Jaystreak - Blue-gray and black tom with a white stripe across each side, blue eyes.

Driftrunner- Dark golden brown tom with very thick black classic tabby stripes, muzzle, chin, ears, paws, chest, and underbelly, amber eyes.

Apprentice, Petalpaw

Howlstorm - Dark gray tom with green eyes.

Dandeliontail - Yellow tabby and white she-cat with yellow eyes.

Whitehare - White tom with light green eyes.

Apprentices

Starpaw - Golden yellow she-cat with a yellow tail tip and star shape on chest, yellow eyes.

Blazingpaw - Golden yellow tom with yellow eyes.

Petalpaw - Yellow, orange, and white she-cat with yellow eyes.

Tornadopaw - Dark gray tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Scorchpaw - Dark tortoiseshell tom that is mostly black with small ginger splotches, amber eyes.

Sharppaw - Thin black tom with green-yellow eyes.

Queens

Willowtail- Light gray tabby she-cat with blue eyes. Expecting Icetail's kits.

Clovernose - Brown and white she-cat with green eyes. Expecting Thunderjolt's kits.

Elders

Whitefrost - White she-cat with blue eyes.

Cornwhisker - Golden tabby and white tom with yellow eyes.

RIVERCLAN

Leader: Frostedstar - White tom with pale blue eyes.

Deputy: Ravenfeather - Black tom with amber eyes.

Medicine cat: Otterpelt - Red-brown she-cat with amber eyes.

Warriors

Petalfin - Silver, dark gray, black, and white splashed she-cat with blue eyes.

Dipfoot - Gray tom with silver paws, blue eyes.

Cherryberry - Red and ginger she-cat with amber eyes.

Winterlight - Long furred dark gray and pale yellow she-cat with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Pebblepaw

Duckwing - Dark brown tabby tom with sea green eyes.

Warmmoss - Light brown and white she-cat with pale green-yellow eyes.

Heartsong - Silver and white she-cat with black ears and tail, blue eyes.

Darkminnow - Sleek black tom with dark teal eyes.

Apprentice, Rainpaw

Mintfrost - White tom with small silver tabby patches, green eyes.

Apprentice, Lemonpaw

Arcticblaze - Small white tom with ice blue eyes.

Dovewhisper- Pale silver and white tabby she-cat with pale green eyes.

Thunderwater - Dark gray and black tabby tom with dark blue eyes.

Frostleaf - Mottled pale brown and white speckled tom with a white face and legs, blue eyes.

Tansytail - Light golden brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Apprentices

Lemonpaw- White tom with yellow patches and yellow eyes.

Rainpaw - Silver she-cat with darker splashes, light blue eyes.

Pebblepaw- Mottled gray tom with white paws, pale green eyes.

Sagepaw - Silver and black tabby she-cat with pale blue-green eyes.

The medicine cat apprentice.

Queens

Risingmoon - White she-cat with dark gray and silver tabby points, blue eyes. Expecting Darkminnow's kits.

Elders

Mudslip - Brown tom with darker ears, tail tip, and paws, black muzzle, green eyes.

Swanpool - Slender white she-cat with black tail tip, ears, muzzle, and toes, ice blue eyes.

THUNDERCLAN

Leader: Strawberrystar - Speckled reddish-ginger and cream she-cat with amber eyes.

Deputy: Snowfalcon - Broad shouldered white tom with amber eyes.

Apprentice, Darkpaw

Medicine Cat: Spicewhisker - Small black tom with a white muzzle, tail tip, and front right paw, yellow eyes.

Warriors

Broadwing - Broad shouldered dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Apprentice, Batpaw

Oaktuft - Brown and cream tabby tom with amber eyes.

Morningmist - Light gray tabby she-cat with light blue eyes.

Chillwhisker - Light gray tabby tom with light blue eyes.

Hickoryroot - Brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Cedarnose - Dark brown tabby tom with a white splashed muzzle and paws, amber eyes.

Vanillafern - Creamy colored tabby she-cat with pale yellow eyes.

Apprentices

Batpaw - Smoky black tom with gray-brown muzzle and underbelly, amber eyes.

Darkpaw - Very dark brown tom with swirled black stripes, amber eyes.

SKYCLAN

Leader: Ravenstar - Long furred black tom with green eyes.

Deputy: Sandblaze - Light golden yellow tom with light brown-ginger paws, mark on chest, ears, chin, and yellowish blaze on forehead and tail tip. Yellow eyes.

Medicine Cat: Ryeheart - Brown tabby tom with dark brown tabby legs, tail, ears, and nose blaze, creamy chin, muzzle, chest, and tail tip, amber eyes.

Warriors

Tigerleap - Dark golden brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Brackenleaf - Dark ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Chapter 1

"Milkblaze, look!"

The white and cream warrior turned his head and saw his apprentice pop his head out of a bush, holding a limp frog in his jaws. "Well done, Timberpaw!" He praised, and the young tabby padded over to him, his tail high. "That's two in a row."

Timberpaw dropped the frog at his paws and looked up at his mentor. "I've been meaning to ask," He meowed hesitantly. "How far along am I with my training?"

Milkblaze expected to see an excited look in the young tom's eyes, but his expression was serious. *He's mature for his age.* He thought. *Most apprentices are bouncing around ready to explode at the thought of completing their training!* "You're just over halfway," He told him. "And you're learning very fast. You'll be taking the oath before you know it."

The tabby's tufted ears pricked forward, revealing his contained excitement. Milkblaze purred and looked toward the sky. They had left the camp just before dawn. Now, the sun had begun to rise beyond the pine trees. "I think that's enough training for today," He meowed. "Let's collect your prey and head back to camp."

"Great!" Timberpaw purred. "Buzzardglare and Foxshine will be hungry." As he dug up the other frog he caught, he looked up at Milkblaze. "I've been wondering, about the oath... Are we really expected to defend the clan with our lives? I mean..." He paused as though gathering his thoughts. "Are all warriors meant to die in battle? I want to live a long life. I don't want to die..."

For a heartbeat, Milkblaze was startled by the unusual question. *Of course you're expected to protect your clanmates with your life! Why wouldn't you?* He pondered upon his response as Timberpaw picked up two frogs by the legs in his teeth, and he padded alongside his apprentice toward the camp.

Milkblaze could understand Timberpaw's concern. As a young apprentice, the oath seemed to be of little importance, simply words in a ceremony. But this leafbare, every cat had seen just how real taking the oath was.

For moons, the clans had been terrorized by a gang of rogues led by a merciless cat called Bone Shred. Warriors from every clan had died, fulfilling their promise to defend their clans with their lives. ShadowClan had lost their deputy, Pinetail, who had since been succeeded by Depthwater. Every cat in ShadowClan respected and grieved for her. Milkblaze did miss the prickly she-cat. But he and his littermates had lost far more than their deputy.

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"Milkpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your clan, even at the cost of your life?"

A few tail lengths from the foot of the meeting rock, Milkpaw stood tall, yellow eyes shining up at his leader. His heart fluttered excitedly in the moment he'd waited so long for. "I do." He meowed.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name." A frosty breeze ruffled Stormstar's gray tabby pelt. "Milkpaw, from this moment on you will be known as Milkblaze. StarClan honors your loyalty and kindness, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ShadowClan."

Milkblaze! His heart warmed. He immediately turned his head to see his mother, Redblaze. She sat at the front of the crowd, her yellow eyes glowing with pride. *Stormstar named me after her. What an honor!* Beside her, his father, Baconstripe, watched them warmly.

Their mother, Redblaze, was one of the most experienced warriors in ShadowClan. Every cat admired and respected her. Even Stormstar himself seemed to rank her above him. *Stormstar isn't a young cat anymore.* Milkblaze thought. *And I hope he doesn't join StarClan any time soon. But I'm sure when Pinetail becomes leader, she'll make Redblaze her deputy.*

"Milkblaze! Maplefur! Rosebreeze!" The clan cheered the names of

the new warriors.

Despite the chill of leaf-bare, Milkblaze felt as warm as though the sun were shining down on his pelt. He started to turn toward his siblings, but found himself face to face with Buzzardglare. "Congratulations, Milkblaze." The older tom rumbled. "You'll be a great warrior."

"Thank you!" He purred. "You were a great mentor." As the tabby turned away and headed to the fresh kill pile, Milkblaze saw his parents approaching.

"I'm so proud of you all!" Redblaze purred, her ginger tail tip high in the air as she leaned forward and licked Milkblaze's head. Behind her, Baconstripe gave Rosebreeze an affectionate nuzzle, then touched his nose to Maplefur's shoulder.

"Well done," Baconstripe purred loudly. "Stormstar chose perfect names."

Milkblaze exchanged delighted looks with his siblings. Above them, Stormstar dipped his head to dismiss the clan, then leapt down from the rock, stepping forward to greet the new warriors. "Congratulations," He meowed warmly. His gaze traveled past the trio to Redblaze. "You must be proud."

He detected a solemn tone in his leader's voice. When he looked at his mother, she had met Stormstar's gaze steadily. "We're very proud, Stormstar. Thank you."

Milkblaze dipped his head respectfully. "You named me after Redblaze, didn't you?"

The dark gray tabby dragged his gaze away from Redblaze's to look at Milkblaze. "I did. You've inherited a lot of her skill and courage." He quickly added. "All of you have."

Milkblaze purred proudly while Rosebreeze murmured thanks. When Stormstar turned away, Redblaze leaned against Baconstripe, and the couple gazed at their kits proudly. Milkblaze gazed back happily. *Everything is perfect...*

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"Hawkfeather! Hawkfeather, quick!"

Milkblaze's head shot up from where he'd been crouched by the fresh kill pile, his stomach twisting. *Oh no, not another attack!* He silently begged.

Bone Shred's rogues continued ambushing patrols, killing every clan cat they could. Just a few days ago, their father, Baconstripe, had been leading a hunting patrol when they were ambushed. Baconstripe had suffered horrible wounds, and though their medicine cat Hawkfeather did everything he could, StarClan had taken him. Milkblaze and his family were still deeply grieving for him.

Depthwater panted heavily by the camp entrance, and Ashcloud skidded to a halt behind him, his eyes wide and distressed. Neither cat was injured, and Milkblaze's heart pounded as he wondered what had happened.

Stormstar hurried forward to meet them. "What's happened?" He demanded, unable to hide the fear in his voice. Hawkfeather rushed to his side, already equipped with a bundle of cobwebs.

"It's Redblaze!" Depthwater gasped. "She- she's badly wounded, just outside our territory!"

The ShadowClan leader's eyes lit with alarm. "No!"

Redblaze? Milkblaze's eyes widened, and his heart exploded in fear. *No! Oh no!* He leaped to his paws and rushed over to the group. "Where is she?" He gasped.

After a moment of shock, Stormstar jerked a nod to Depthwater and Ashcloud. "Lead the way!"

The two warriors spun and took off through the snow, Stormstar, Hawkfeather, and Milkblaze hard on their tails. Milkblaze's mind raced even faster with dozens of questions. *How bad is it? Will she survive? Why was she out alone, and outside of clan borders?? What if she- No, don't think about that! It's okay!*

As they passed carrionplace, the metallic scent of blood rose above the reek of twoleg trash. Fear shot through his veins like icy fire. A few moments later, he caught sight of his mother, and his breath caught in his throat.

No...

Redblaze lay on her side, droplets of blood staining the snow around her. Blood splashed her cream tabby fur. The scent of Bone Shred's rogues lingered in the air. Of course, they had done this.

"No!" Milkblaze wailed and dropped to her side, certain that his mother was dead. Up close, he saw horrible slashes in her throat and flank. But her ears twitched in response to his voice, and her eyes flickered open.

"Milkblaze...?" She murmured.

Stormstar crouched over her, his paws trembling. "Redblaze! What happened? Why were you out here alone?" When she didn't respond, he looked up sharply at his medicine cat. "Hawkfeather?"

The tabby medicine cat leaned over Redblaze, sniffing at her wounds. After a moment, he closed his eyes and sat up, shaking his head. "They're too deep, and she's lost too much blood already." He murmured. "I'm sorry."

No... The world blurred around Milkblaze as he tried to focus on his mother's face. *I can't lose her! I've already lost Baconstripe! Not so soon!*

"I look forward to hunting with Baconstripe again..." Redblaze breathed shakily. She tried to raise her head, but it quickly fell back into the snow. "Milkblaze...?"

He swallowed the growing lump in his throat. "I'm here." He touched his nose to her bloody cheek fur.

"I'm sorry to leave you so soon..." Her yellow eyes glistened with pain and love. "Please... You must always be there for Maplefur and Rosebreeze..." Redblaze's voice came out as a strained whisper. "Protect them..."

Milkblaze's heart felt like a boulder in his chest. He shut his eyes and pressed his head into his mother's fur, trying to focus on her scent and ignore the reek of blood and rogue. "I will..." He choked. "I promise." *And that's an oath...*

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"Milkblaze?"

Timberpaw's voice snapped Milkblaze out of his memories. "What?" He looked aside.

His apprentice stared at him questioningly. "Are you okay? I-I was asking you about the warrior's oath."

The oath... Milkblaze blinked slowly, memories of his mother aching through his heart. He looked downward as he slowly padded forward. "Warriors don't live for the sake of dying in battle." He meowed quietly. "But we're expected to follow our hearts. We defend our clanmates and every cat we love even at the cost of our lives." He remembered the love in Redblaze's eyes, even as she watched him in her final moments.

"StarClan willing, you're never faced with the decision," Milkblaze went on solemnly. "But when it comes to your clanmates and kin, you'll put your life in danger for them, often without realizing it. That's what it means to have the heart of a warrior."

Timberpaw nodded slowly, his yellow eyes thoughtful as he processed his mentor's words.

When the two entered the camp, they found it as busy as always. By the meeting rock, Stormstar lay alongside his mate, Silverblossom. Depthwater was in the center of the clearing, speaking with Cobratail and Bluerain.

Copperpaw and Flamepaw emerged from the elders' den, each carrying a bundle of moss. Timberpaw hurried past them with his frogs, clearly eager to give them to the elders.

Milkblaze's stomach rumbled, and he'd started toward the fresh kill pile to grab a piece of prey for himself when he spotted Maplefur's

cream tabby pelt across the clearing. His brother was speaking with his apprentice, Diamondpaw. Milkblaze purred and padded toward them.

"Tomorrow we'll practice the belly rake again." Maplefur was telling her. "You nearly had it down today!"

Diamondpaw's blue eyes glowed. "Thanks, Maplefur!" The silver spotted she-cat turned and bounded across the clearing, her tail high in the air.

Maplefur chuckled, and Milkblaze watched her with a purr before continuing toward his brother. "How's training going?" He asked as he sat beside him.

"Going well," The cream tabby purred. "Diamondpaw may seem quiet and easygoing, but she can be a pawful." He hesitated. "Caring for a young cat like this- It makes me want to be a father even more." He admitted.

Milkblaze blinked in surprise. *A father?* He hadn't noticed Maplefur getting close with any she-cat in the clan. But he was a kind, loyal, and caring cat. Milkblaze had no doubt that his brother would be a great mate and father.

Maplefur seemed to read his thoughts and purred. "I know, I haven't met the right cat yet. But hopefully soon." He rested his yellow gaze on his brother. "How about you?"

"Timberpaw's training is going well-" Milkblaze began.

His brother looked mildly amused. "Yes, of course. But do you want to be a father, too? Maybe our kits could grow up together."

Milkblaze was caught off guard by the question. "What?" It felt like just yesterday he and his siblings were made warriors. And now they were already thinking about becoming parents? *We're still so young, aren't we? I'm happy just being a warrior and a mentor. I haven't even thought about taking a mate, let alone having kits!* He opened his jaws to tell him this.

"Maplefur!" Depthwater called. The deputy stood a few fox lengths

away. Bluerain, Crowmask, and Cobratail were near him, looking at Maplefur expectantly. "Bluerain is leading a hunting patrol. Would you like to join them?"

He nodded. "Sure!" He stood and waved his tail. "See you, Milkblaze."

Milkblaze found himself relieved to not have to discuss mates or kits. "Good hunting." He meowed after his brother.

A red tabby flashed past him. "Can I come?" Poppywing asked hopefully.

"Of course." Bluerain purred, her gaze traveling over the group. "Are we ready?" She didn't wait for a response and turned, leading her patrol to the thorn tunnel.

Milkblaze watched them until Maplefur's pelt vanished in the shadows.

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After the patrol left, Milkblaze had gone to the fresh kill pile. He now crouched over a half eaten frog, chewing on the tender flesh. The sun had risen higher in the sky now, the purple hue of dawn fading away.

"Mind if I join you?"

He looked up to see Rosebreeze, her amber eyes gleaming. He purred and waved his tail. "Of course not."

His sister settled beside him, sniffing at the pile briefly before choosing a mouse for herself. "I never see you around these days. Timberpaw keeps you busy." She meowed in amusement before taking a bite of the mouse.

"Training an apprentice is harder than I thought," Milkblaze admitted. "But I don't mind it. I'm sure you'll have your own apprentice soon."

Rosebreeze hesitated. "I'm not sure if I want one," She confessed. "I

like being able to hunt and patrol freely. I don't think I have the patience to deal with a bossy young cat!" She purred.

He chuckled in amusement. "An apprentice is nothing. Imagine dealing with kits!"

"Kits?" Rosebreeze's amusement faded. "Oh, I'd love kits someday."

Milkblaze stared at his sister in disbelief. *You too? Why does everyone want to have kits?*

"Stormstar!"

Poppywing burst through the thorn tunnel, her blue eyes wide and troubled. Milkblaze was immediately reminded of Redblaze's death and stood up. *Oh, StarClan! It can't be Bone Shred's rogues, can it? I thought we got rid of them!* For a heartbeat, he was terrified that the clans had failed to drive them out, and that Maplefur was dying in a pool of blood somewhere in the forest.

Stormstar quickly rose to his paws. "Poppywing? What's going on?" Beside him, Silverblossom's ears pricked with worry.

"There's a rogue on our territory." Poppywing explained quickly. "She seems to mean no harm, but she's one of Bone Shred's cats, we're sure of it."

The cats around them were quickly disturbed at this news. "What?" Cliffshade leaped to his paws, his neck fur bristling. "Well, what are you meowing about here for? Go drive her out!"

"Maplefur thinks we should hear her out-" Poppywing began.

"Are you mouse-brained?" Ashcloud exclaimed. "That's-"

Stormstar raised his voice. "That's enough!" He stepped forward to meet Poppywing. "I'll come and see what we're dealing with," He growled. "Lead the way, Poppywing." The young she-cat nodded and turned, the leader following her out of the camp.

The cats in the clearing immediately began to murmur anxiously to one another. "Why doesn't the patrol drive her out?" Cliffshade

hissed to Cougarfoot.

"What's going on?" Bloomfire asked, emerging from the warriors den.

Flamepaw turned to her quickly. "One of Bone Shred's rogues is on our territory," He explained. Bloomfire's eyes widened.

Milkblaze was deeply troubled by this news. "I thought we drove them out!" He whispered to Rosebreeze. "Why is one of them on our territory?"

His sister shook her head, her eyes lit with worry. "I don't know. What could she want?"

"Depthwater!" Rainheart took a step toward the deputy, his eyes wide. "Does this mean Bone Shred's rogues are back? What do we do?" He looked sharply toward the thorn tunnel. "Poppywing is out there with a murderer!"

"Calm down, Rainheart." Depthwater twitched his tail. "Stormstar will explain the situation when he returns." Though it was clear that the dark blue-black tom was just as uneasy at the news.

Time seemed to stand still as the clan awaited Stormstar's return. Milkblaze shared their fears. This season had been one of the worst the clans had ever faced. So many cats, young and old, had fallen victim to Bone Shred's Gang. What if some had returned to avenge their leader? What if they were faced with another war?

After what felt like moons, Stormstar entered the camp, his expression unreadable. Crowmask was close behind his leader, grumbling with his ears flat and eyes narrowed to amber slits. Poppywing and Bluerain were next, murmuring to one another. Milkblaze relaxed when he saw Maplefur, but half a second later his heart nearly shot into his throat.

His brother padded alongside an unfamiliar she-cat who had emerged from the shadows with him. She had thick, slightly mangled golden brown fur, and black ears that flicked back against her head. Her amber eyes flashed nervously from side to side,

surveying the camp. The familiar scent of Bone Shred's rogues filled the air.

The clearing erupted into yowls and gasps of shock and fury. "You brought the rogue here?" Cliffshade yowled. "Are you out of your mind?"

"Get her away!" Sunflower hissed from outside the nursery, her belly round with kits. "You're putting all of us in danger!"

"Stormstar?" Depthwater stared at his leader in disbelief.

The ShadowClan leader meowed something quickly to Maplefur before hurrying through the crowd and leaping onto the meeting rock, yowling to gather his clan. But nearly every cat was in the clearing now, some angry, some afraid as they stared at the newcomer.

Maplefur had guided the stranger to the foot of the rock, standing close to her and looking around swiftly, as though ready to defend her if any cat tried to attack. Milkblaze watched him, puzzled. *Has Stormstar asked him to guard her in case she attacks? Or the clan?*

"What's all the yellin' about?" Buzzardglare grumbled as he stepped out of the elders' den.

"Stormstar has brought a murderer to our camp!" Crowmask hissed in response.

The old tabby's good eye widened. "Could you repeat that? I think I'm going deaf as well as blind."

"Every cat, listen!" Stormstar began, looking down at his alarmed clan. "I've brought this cat into our camp because-"

"Because you have bees in your brain!" Crowmask screeched.

Stormstar raised his voice above the warrior. "Bluerain's patrol has found this cat on our territory!" His green eyes were dark with conflict as he carefully chose his words. "She does not wish to harm us. She is alone and afraid."

"How do you know that?" Cougarfoot asked uncertainly. "She could have friends prowling our territory right now!"

"We didn't scent any other cats." Bluerain spoke up from where she stood near Maplefur.

The clan leader dipped his head to the she-cat. "She wants to become a warrior of ShadowClan. Yes, this cat *was* one of Bone Shred's rogues. But-"

"But what?" Foxshine called from outside the elders' den. "If she was, that's bad enough! How do we know she didn't kill one of our warriors?"

"Or that she won't do it again?" Cliffshade added darkly. "She could have killed my mother, Pinetail." He shouldered his way toward the she-cat, unsheathing his claws. "Send her away, or I'll do it myself!" He snarled.

Milkblaze was stunned when Maplefur pushed in front of the rogue, glaring at the gray and brown tom. "You won't lay a claw on her!" He hissed. "She's done nothing to harm us!"

"You'd betray your clan for a rogue?" Cliffshade crouched to lunge at him. Maplefur narrowed his eyes, preparing for the attack.

"Stop!" Depthwater pushed between the two warriors. "Clanmates do not attack one another! We will listen to what Stormstar and this rogue have to say."

Stormstar gave his deputy a nod. "Thank you, Depthwater." He drew in a deep breath before speaking. "Poisoned Sap, will you please tell the clan what you told me in the forest?"

"Poisoned Sap?" Cliffshade snorted. "Oh that's a reassuring name! I'm sure she's a rainbow of joy!"

As Maplefur glared at him, the she-cat straightened. "O-oh, of course." She hesitated, her ragged tail tucked between her legs as she flicked her amber gaze around her. "My name is Poisoned Sap," She began, her voice trembling. "Yes, I was one of Bone Shred's rogues. He was my brother, b-but..." She looked at her black paws.

"Not a very good one."

A few cats muttered to themselves, while most listened curiously. MIlkblaze studied the she-cat thoughtfully. She definitely doesn't look like a threat, but...

"Bone Shred forced me to help him in his attacks on the clans," Poisoned Sap went on, her voice full of pain. "I'm very sorry for everything they did to you." She paused. "The RiverClan warrior, Iceslide, was a good friend of mine. He told me that after Bone Shred was defeated, he would help me join RiverClan, but..." She shut her eyes. "You know he died so bravely."

The clan murmured to one another thoughtfully. "If Iceslide saw good in her, we can trust her, can't we?" Copperpaw mewed hesitantly. A few cats agreed quietly.

Milkblaze narrowed his eyes. *How do we know she's telling the truth? The only cat who can confirm it is Iceslide. And he's in StarClan now.*

"I've never wanted to hurt any cat." Poisoned Sap trembled. "Now that my brother is dead, I have nowhere to go. But I finally have the chance to live the life of freedom I've always wanted." She raised her chin. "I want to be a warrior."

After a moment, Crowmask broke the silence. "Murderer's don't get to be warriors."

"Stop it!" Maplefur glared at him. "Poisoned Sap just wants the chance to finally live her own life! It's not her fault her brother was a terrible cat!" He turned to look at her. "I think she'll make a great warrior, and she'll prove herself to all of you."

Milkblaze was shocked at his brother's behaviour. *What's wrong with you? She was one of Bone Shred's rogues! Those cats killed Baconstripe and Redblaze!*

"Howlstorm and Dandeliontail were members of Bone Shred's Gang too," Maplefur went on. "But they joined WindClan. They're good cats, and very friendly. Poisoned Sap is just like them."

That's true... Milkblaze had heard about the couple at the last

gathering. Despite having been rogues, they seemed to be settling in well. *But there's something different about Poisoned Sap...*

As the clan quieted, Poisoned Sap looked up at Stormstar anxiously. "Please, can I join ShadowClan? I'll do whatever I must to prove myself."

Stormstar's eyes narrowed as he stared down at her. *Don't let her.* Milkblaze silently willed his leader. *I don't trust her. No cat does.* "Poisoned Sap, I will allow you to stay in ShadowClan."

The clan rose into commentary, but Stormstar raised his tail for silence. "However, you will be trained in the ways of the warrior code and stay in the apprentices' den." He studied the cats in the crowd. "Cobratail?"

The mottled black and red tom twitched his tail. "Yes, Stormstar?"

"You will mentor Poisoned Sap," Stormstar told him. "You will train her like any other apprentice, but focus on teaching her the warrior code and clan life. After three moons, if she passes her assessment and proves herself trustworthy, she can permanently join ShadowClan as a warrior." His eyes narrowed. "If she does not, she must leave the forest and never return." He looked to Poisoned Sap. "Understood?"

The golden brown she-cat bowed her head low to the ground. "Thank you, Stormstar." Her voice was rich with relief. "I won't disappoint you."

The clan slowly dispersed, many forming smaller groups to discuss the latest news. "I can't believe this," Cougarfoot muttered. "A former murderer in our clan."

"It's mouse-brained." Crowmask growled. "She'll never be one of us."

"But she was forced to do terrible things. Maybe she's a good cat." Poppywing pointed out, blinking sympathetically toward the she-cat.

Milkblaze followed her gaze. Below the meeting rock, Poisoned Sap was looking around, a warm glow in her eyes as she studied the

camp. Maplefur brushed his shoulder against hers and purred reassuringly.

I don't like this... Milkblaze thought as he stared at the stranger, his fur prickling at the sight of her so close to his beloved brother. *This is a mistake. I can feel it.*

Chapter 2

Three sunrises passed. The air slowly became warmer, melting away the last signs of leaf-bare. Prey became less scarce, and so Depthwater was sending out hunting patrols more frequently, taking advantage of the good hunting.

Milkblaze had been called to join one of the first patrols of the day. Just after sunrise, he'd left with Crowmask, Ashcloud, and Silverblossom. Now, the sky was a bright pale blue as the cats headed through the forest toward the camp. Milkblaze carried a plump frog he'd caught in the marsh.

When they entered the camp, Milkblaze padded to the fresh kill pile and deposited the frog. Bluerain looked up from the mouse she'd been eating. "Great catch!" She purred.

Milkblaze dipped his head, unable to suppress a purr of pride at the senior warrior's praise. "Thank you!"

The silver spotted she-cat peered past him. "Ashcloud, that's a nice mouse as well. I'm sure Greenpine will appreciate it."

When Milkblaze turned to look at his clanmate, he was surprised to see a startled expression on his face. "O-oh, yes, I think she will." Ashcloud looked embarrassed as he ducked his head and padded toward the nursery.

It doesn't sound like he meant to give the mouse to her. Milkblaze thought, blinking in confusion as Ashcloud disappeared into the nursery. Just last night, Greenpine had given birth to three healthy toms: Stripedkit, Mottledkit, and Foxkit. Ashcloud was their father. Though Milkblaze had no experience with relationships, he could see that something was bothering Ashcloud. He wasn't behaving the way other new fathers did. He seemed... Uncomfortable. *Just a few moons ago, Ashcloud and Greenpine were closer than a pair of lovebirds. What happened?*

"Hey, Milkblaze!" Timberpaw raced over, breaking Milkblaze from his thoughts. He paused and studied the fresh kill pile. "Can I take that frog? It's for the elders. Buzzardglare claims he's starving to death."

"Well, we wouldn't want that." Milkblaze purred as he thought of the cranky elder, who was also his former mentor. "Go ahead."

Timberpaw blinked gratefully. "I'll tell him you caught it." He snatched up the frog by its leg and turned toward the elder's den, only to crash into another cat.

Poisoned Sap spun to face the apprentice, dropping the vole she'd been carrying. "Watch it!" She spat, her fur bristling.

The young tabby's eyes were round with shock as he stumbled backwards, the frog falling from his teeth. "S-sorry! I didn't see you there."

Milkblaze's heart leaped with fear, and he hurried to his apprentice's side. "What are you doing?" He warily asked Poisoned Sap. *She was going into the elder's den! Did she plan to attack them?*

The golden brown she-cat flattened her ears. "What's it look like I'm doing?" She demanded, lashing her tail at the vole.

Before Milkblaze could respond, Maplefur stepped to her side. "She's just bringing prey to the elders." He blinked at his brother. "What's wrong?"

Milkblaze stared at his brother, surprised at how quickly he'd come to Poisoned Sap's defense. In the past few days, Maplefur never seemed to leave her side. After Stormstar agreed to give her a chance, Maplefur had taken it upon himself to give her a tour of the camp. Cobratail occasionally stole her away for training, but more often than not, Maplefur would accompany them.

Many cats like Crowmask and Cliffshade were suspicious of her, giving her distrustful glares and whispering about her to the rest of the clan. Maplefur never hesitated to stand up to them.

After a heartbeat of confusion, Milkblaze gave his pelt a shake. "Err

nothing." He muttered. "Timberpaw was going to feed the elders, and she startled him."

Maplefur's yellow eyes narrowed, and Milkblaze could almost read his thoughts. *"It looks like she startled you, too".* "Well, Timberpaw can give the frog to another cat."

"Right." Milkblaze let his fur flatten, trying to push away a horrible image of Poisoned Sap standing over Buzzardglare and Foxshine's blood soaked bodies. "Timberpaw, why don't you bring the frog to Sunflower?"

Timberpaw nodded. "Okay." He hesitantly looked up at Poisoned Sap. "I'm sorry for bumping into you." He sounded uneasy. Milkblaze knew his apprentice was just as wary of the former rogue.

The she-cat grunted in response before picking up her vole and stepping into the elders' den. As Timberpaw headed for the nursery, Maplefur padded toward Milkblaze. "Are you alright?" He asked, his eyes filled with worry.

Milkblaze was quiet for a long moment. *I need to talk to him about her... He must understand that something isn't right about all of this.* "Can we talk? Privately?"

Maplefur frowned. "Of course." He padded across the clearing, and Milkblaze followed, his mind racing as he tried to find the right words. When they reached the shade of a pine tree, Maplefur turned to face him and sat, his eyes lit with concern. "What is it?"

Milkblaze sat beside his brother and hesitated, staring across at the elders' den for a moment before meeting his brothers' gaze. "You've been spending a lot of time with Poisoned Sap," He commented, choosing his words carefully.

"Yes." Maplefur blinked. "Few other cats are making her feel welcome. She needs to know that someone is there for her."

Milkblaze shifted his paws in the dirt, remembering the anger in Poisoned Sap's eyes as she faced Timberpaw. "She could have been kinder to Timberpaw."

"He startled her, that's all. She used to be a rogue and needed to keep her guard up all the time," Maplefur meowed simply. "I know she seems grumpy, but she's really a kind cat when you get to know her. I think she's just a little stressed trying to adjust to clan life."

"But..." Milkblaze tried to calm himself, but fear for his brother disturbed his train of thought. "Maplefur, don't you see? She was one of Bone Shred's rogues!"

Maplefur's eyes dimmed, and he lashed his tail in frustration. "You sound just like every other cat in the clan," He growled. "Why do you have to be so suspicious?" When Milkblaze didn't respond, Maplefur rested his paw on his shoulder. "I'm fine, okay?" He meowed quietly. "Soon enough, you'll see Poisoned Sap the same way I do. The whole clan will."

He sounded so determined, Milkblaze suddenly realized how much this meant to him. *He really cares about Poisoned Sap. He's formed a connection with her from the day he met her in the woods.*

"Maplefur?"

Milkblaze snapped his attention away from Maplefur, and his fur prickled uneasily as Poisoned Sap padded over to them, pausing and glancing from one cat to the other. "Is everything alright?" She tilted her head.

Strange... Suddenly, she seems like an entirely different cat from the one who hissed at Timberpaw. Milkblaze caught her eye, and for a long moment they stared at each other, tension piercing the air like a thorn. *She knows I don't trust her.*

"Everything's fine." Maplefur promised as he stepped toward her, casting a glance over his shoulder at Milkblaze.

After what felt like moons, Poisoned Sap removed her piercing gaze from Milkblaze and put her attention on Maplefur. "Cobratail wants me to go hunting." A purr rumbled in her throat. "Would you join me?"

"Of course." Maplefur purred, and as Poisoned Sap turned away, he

flicked his tail to Milkblaze in farewell.

Milkblaze stared helplessly after his brother as he headed to the thorn tunnel, his flank brushing against Poisoned Sap's.

"Well, it seems clear who the first of us to have kits will be." Rosebreeze appeared at Milkblaze's side, purring teasingly as she watched their brother leave.

Milkblaze jerked his head toward her, his eyes wide. "What?" He exclaimed, his heart lurching. "You mean- they-"

"It's obvious how close they are. They're bound to be mates soon." Rosebreeze purred. Her amusement faded as she saw the look of shock on his face. "Come on, Milkblaze. I know, she was one of Bone Shred's rogues. But she's been sleeping in the apprentices' den. She's been caring for the elders. She's had every opportunity to attack us, and she hasn't. Surely if she was up to no good, she would have done something by now?"

Unless she's planning something bigger... Waiting to earn our trust. Milkblaze shook his head. "There's something about her I don't trust. She acts completely different around Maplefur."

"She trusts him." Rosebreeze meowed. "And can you blame her, when so many other cats treat her like a case of green cough?" She twitched her bushy tail. "Maplefur isn't an idiot. If he trusts Poisoned Sap, then I do, too."

Milkblaze sighed. "I trust Maplefur," He muttered, his stomach churning with worry. "It's Poisoned Sap who I don't trust."

As Rosebreeze shook her head and turned away, a pang of guilt washed over him. *Am I being a bad brother by not supporting Maplefur? Am I being too suspicious of a cat who just wants to start a new life here?*

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Milkblaze crept through the marsh, his eyes fixed on a frog settled in the mud up ahead. As he stalked closer to his prey, he remained deep in thought. *Rosebreeze is right. Maplefur is a smart cat. But...*

Unease prickled his fur. He's also very kind, and some cat could take advantage of that...

Distracted, he was startled when he felt a twig snap under his fore paw. *Mouse dung!* He stared ahead in dismay as the frog croaked before hopping into a clump of grass.

As Milkblaze stood, there was a rustle and a thud on the other side. A moment later, Ashcloud stepped out from the grass, the frog limp in his teeth. He dropped it at his paws. "I think this is yours."

Milkblaze dipped his head in embarrassment. *An apprentice could have caught that!* "Err, yes. Thanks."

His clanmate took a step forward and nudged the frog toward him with his muzzle before raising his head. Milkblaze was surprised to see a distant look in his green eyes, full of sadness and conflict.

Something isn't right between him and Greenpine. Milkblaze hesitated. It was none of his business what had happened between the couple. However he was saddened by the look in Ashcloud's eyes and felt he could use a friend to confide in.

Ashcloud began to turn away, but Milkblaze quickly spoke. "Are you alright?"

The gray and white tom hesitated for a long moment. "I'm... I'm fine."

Milkblaze didn't believe that. "We're friends, aren't we? If something is wrong, you're welcome to talk to me about it." He sat down and flicked his tail to the space beside him, inviting Ashcloud to join him.

Ashcloud stared at him uncertainly. "Okay..." He meowed at last. "I do need to talk to someone about it." He sat beside Milkblaze and stared at his paws for a long moment, his eyes flicking back and forth as he figured out how to put his thoughts into words.

Milkblaze waited patiently, though he grew more concerned for his clanmate. *Something is deeply troubling him... What could be so wrong between him and Greenpine?*

After what felt like moons, Ashcloud spoke. "I thought I was happy with Greenpine, and I thought I wanted to be a father. But after our kits were born, it just... Didn't feel right."

I can't blame him. Milkblaze thought. "I don't want to have kits," He admitted. "I don't think all tom's should be expected to take a mate."

"I want to take a mate." Ashcloud mumbled. "But I don't want kits."

Milkblaze blinked. *Doesn't he understand what happens when two cats become mates?* "Unless Hawkfeather discovers a new herb that prevents she-cats from having kits, I'm not sure how that's possible..."

"Toms can't have kits." Ashcloud looked away, speaking quietly.

At first, Milkblaze stared at his clanmate, completely puzzled. Then it dawned on him. "You mean..."

"Yes. I do like she-cats, but I think I like toms more." Ashcloud confessed, his gaze fixed on his paws. "I know what you're thinking. It's unusual, and the clan would never understand. But it's how I feel, and I can't change that." He hesitated before continuing. "Greenpine knows, and she understands. We're no longer mates, but still close friends."

Milkblaze nodded slowly. "What about the kits?" He asked quietly.

He sighed. "I wish I'd put my feelings together before they were born. I feel terrible. But I'm going to help Greenpine raise them until they're apprenticed." When Milkblaze didn't respond, he flattened his ears. "You think I'm crazy, don't you?"

"Of course not," Milkblaze meowed, startled by his sudden aggression. *I've heard of toms being attracted to other toms, or she-cats to she-cats. But it is less common in the clans. That, or most cats hide it...* "I understand, Ashcloud."

"Do you?" Ashcloud asked quietly. "Do you understand what it's like to hide who you are? To not be able to openly express feelings for a cat you love?"

With a prickle of guilt, Milkblaze looked down. "I don't know what that feels like," He admitted quietly. "But I know it must be hard. Why don't you tell everyone? We're your clanmates. We support one another."

Ashcloud slowly shook his head. "Maybe one day," He murmured. "But right now, I'm not ready."

How long will he hide who he is? Milkblaze blinked sympathetically and touched Ashcloud's shoulder with his tail. "I'll support you when the time comes."

The gray and white tom looked at him gratefully. "Thanks, Milkblaze. It feels good to get it off my chest." He hesitated. "You and Greenpine are the only cats who know."

"I won't tell anyone," Milkblaze promised. "You-"

A terrified shriek split the air, and he and Ashcloud immediately leaped to their paws, ears pricked in alarm. *Someone is being attacked!* As distant hisses and yowls followed, the two warriors took off through the trees toward the sounds.

As Milkblaze dodged a thorn bush, he picked up a familiar scent. Though faint, it sent fear through him like a bolt of lightning. *Bone Shred's Gang!* A heartbeat later, three cats came into view, and he immediately ducked into the shelter of a bush, waving his tail for Ashcloud to do the same.

Two rogues faced the base of a pine tree, a dark brown tabby she-cat and an unusually colored thin cream and black tom. Milkblaze's heartbeat quickened with fear as he recognized them. *I knew it! They were Bone Shred's cats!*

"You've got nowhere to run, kit!" The she-cat hissed, her dark green eyes gleaming maliciously.

"That's right!" Her companion sneered, raising a boney paw. "Shall we finish him, Shredded Ivy?"

"No!" Trapped between the two rogues and the tree crouched Dewpaw. The medicine cat apprentice bristled defiantly, though his

yellow eyes were round with fear.

We have to help him! Milkblaze pushed aside his fear and leaped out from the bushes, slamming his forepaws into the skinny tom. He let out a hiss of surprise as Milkblaze bowled him over, kicking him in the stomach. Milkblaze tumbled onto his side, startled at the tom's strength. *He's so thin!*

"Looks like we have company, Oil Tail," Shredded Ivy commented, her tail lashing while the tom rose to his paws and arched his back, blue eyes narrowed at Milkblaze.

Before he could spring, Ashcloud cannoned into Oil Tail, rolling him to the ground. As Shredded Ivy rolled her eyes, clearly disappointed in her friend, Milkblaze rushed to Dewpaw's side. "Are you-"

Weight slammed into his side, and he yowled as his head was thrust back against the rough bark of the tree. Shredded Ivy held him with her claws at his throat, sneering as she dug them in. "Pathetic warrior!"

Pain pierced Milkblaze's throat, and he shut his eyes, waiting for the rogue to finish him off. A yowl split the air, and after a screech, the pressure disappeared from his throat. Milkblaze snapped open his eyes and gasped in astonishment.

Poisoned Sap!

The ragged ginger she-cat was grappling across the ground with Shredded Ivy. The two cats hissed and spat furiously, while beyond them, Oil Tail had pinned Ashcloud on his stomach, lunging down at his neck.

No! With a yowl, Milkblaze shot across the grass and into Oil Tail, knocking him away from his clanmate. He sank his teeth into the tom's ear, and he howled, ripping himself free. As Milkblaze watched Ashcloud rise to his paws, Shredded Ivy staggered away from Poisoned Sap, glaring at her.

Poisoned Sap bared her teeth and stepped in front of Dewpaw, her

fur bristling. "You're on ShadowClan's land. Leave!"

The tabby she-cat purred. "We're just doing a bit of hunting, Poisoned Sap." She eyed Dewpaw, who stood frozen behind the golden brown she-cat.

Poisoned Sap's amber eyes narrowed. "Ashcloud, go fetch Stormstar. Now!"

The gray and white warrior nodded and took off through the trees. Milkblaze glared at Oil Tail, preparing to attack him. But to his surprise, neither he nor Shredded Ivy tried to stop Ashcloud. *Don't they realize he's going for help?"*

As Oil Tail growled and joined Shredded Ivy, Milkblaze rushed to Poisoned Sap's side to help her shield Dewpaw, glaring at the two rogues. It felt strange, to be fighting on the side of a cat he didn't trust. *But she's my clanmate.* He thought. *Right?*

"It's two against two, old friend," Shredded Ivy sneered.

Poisoned Sap suddenly surged forward. Before Milkblaze had time to process what was happening, she had slashed open Oil Tail's throat, sending blood splattering onto the pine needles. The tom's blue eyes were round as moons as he gapped at Poisoned Sap, choking up blood as crimson oozed from his throat. His thin legs trembled under him before he collapsed.

Milkblaze felt dizzy on his paws as he stared at the dead rogue. *She killed him...* He watched, numb with shock as Poisoned Sap shook blood from her black paw. Suddenly his worst fears had appeared right before his eyes. *She's a killer...*

Beside him, Shredded Ivy stared down at the body, her eyes lit with shock. She swung a bewildered look at Poisoned Sap. "That wasn't part of the-"

"Dewpaw!"

Thank StarClan! Milkblaze turned to see Stormstar burst through the trees, followed closely by Ashcloud and Crowmask. Shredded Ivy stepped backwards, her fur bristling with unease.

"You two were followers of Bone Shred!" Stormstar snarled, his eyes blazing with fury. "Get off ShadowClan territory, now!" He cast a glance at Oil Tail's body. "And take your friend with you." A growl rumbled in his throat as he took an aggressive step toward her. "Set paw in this forest again, come anywhere near my son again... and you'll end up like *him*."

Shredded Ivy seemed frozen for a moment, clearly intimidated by the ShadowClan leader. She glanced down at Oil Tail's body. After a heartbeat, anger flashed in her eyes. "You can keep him!" She spat. "I'm not dragging him across the woods!" With that, she spun and fled.

Stormstar stood motionless, watching her through narrowed eyes. When Shredded Ivy disappeared into the undergrowth, he turned to his clanmates. "Is everyone alright?"

"I'm okay." Dewpaw's voice shook as he stepped out from behind Poisoned Sap. Stormstar stepped forward and rested his chin on his son's head, letting out a sigh of relief.

"Thank StarClan..." The ShadowClan leader murmured. After a moment, he raised his head and looked to Milkblaze and Poisoned Sap. "What happened?"

After taking a moment to gather himself, Milkblaze spoke. "Me and Ashcloud heard yowling and found Dewpaw trapped by those rogues," He meowed. He hesitated, noticing that Poisoned Sap was eying him closely. Despite his feelings toward the former rogue, he couldn't deny that she'd saved his life. "Shredded Ivy would have killed me if Poisoned Sap hadn't arrived."

Dewpaw nodded, flashing her a grateful look. "She would have killed me too."

Stormstar stared at the she-cat, clearly surprised. "You saved them?" His eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Those were your former allies, weren't they?"

"Yes, they were," Poisoned Sap meowed. "But not anymore." She glared down at Oil Tail's body. "I've chosen the path of a warrior."

She lowered her head, her tail twitching uneasily. "I apologize, Stormstar. I broke the warrior code by killing Oil Tail. But I was only protecting Dewpaw and Milkblaze." She bowed her head. "I've failed you. Exile me if you must."

The dark gray tabby's eyes flickered thoughtfully. Milkblaze studied Poisoned Sap. Her dark amber eyes gave nothing away. Though she sounded honest, Milkblaze couldn't help but feel suspicious. *Something isn't right here...*

Stormstar took a step toward her, and she looked up slightly. "When Ashcloud told me he was being attacked, I feared the worst." His eyes glistened with emotion. "Poisoned Sap, you saved my son's life. You defended ShadowClan from intruders, and went as far as to kill a former ally." He nodded. "It's obvious to me that your loyalty lies with us. Tonight, I will proudly make you a warrior of ShadowClan.'

Surprise flashed through Milkblaze, but before he could speak, Crowmask did. "What? But she hasn't completed an assessment!"

"Consider this her assessment," Stormstar meowed. "Poisoned Sap has proven herself to us."

Poisoned Sap stared at him, her eyes glowing. "Thank you, Stormstar."

The tom nodded and turned. "We'll return to camp and hold the ceremony at once." He paused, looking over his shoulder at Oil Tail. "Afterwards, the elders will bury this rogue." His eyes narrowed. "*Outside* of our territory, where he belongs."

As the cats began to follow Stormstar, Milkblaze hesitantly fell in beside Poisoned Sap. She paid no attention to him, her gaze fixed ahead of her. He felt a prickle of guilt. *Have I been wrong about her? She saved my life, and Dewpaw's. She could have sided with Shredded Ivy and Oil Tail, but she didn't... Maybe Maplefur is right.*

After a long moment of consideration, he spoke. "Thank you."

Poisoned Sap's amber eye flicked toward him. "Hmm?"

As Milkblaze met her dark gaze, unease rippled through him. *You*

shouldn't be afraid of a cat who just saved you. He silently scolded himself. *You need to try to trust her.* "You saved my life back there." He meowed.

He waited for her response as they padded onward silently. Just when Milkblaze thought he wouldn't get an answer, she twitched a black ear. "It's what a clan cat would do."

Milkblaze gave her a nod, and they carried on quietly. After a few moments, he considered her odd choice of words. *"It's what a clan cat would do"... Doesn't she consider herself a clan cat now? Or...* Unease flashed through him. *Or does she mean she* acted *the way a clan cat would?*

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The sky was dark now, though there were no stars. Only heavy gray clouds drifted across the night sky.

"Cats of ShadowClan!" Stormstar meowed from atop the meeting rock, his green eyes glinting in the darkness. "As you know, today while gathering herbs, Dewpaw was attacked by two rogues, former followers of Bone Shred."

Milkblaze sat among his clanmates in the clearing, staring up at his leader. He shuffled his paws as the cold night air chilled his fur. *I don't understand why Stormstar couldn't wait until morning for Poisoned Sap's warrior ceremony.* He was freezing and wanted to get some sleep. *At dawn I need to take Timberpaw out for a hunting session!*

"We may have lost Dewpaw-" The ShadowClan leader paused, his eyes flashing with emotion. "*I* may have lost Dewpaw, if not for one brave cat. Poisoned Sap fought the rogues off and defended him."

Me and Ashcloud were there too! Milkblaze wanted to put in, but he had to admit they hadn't been much help before Poisoned Sap had arrived. He strained his neck to peer past Crowmask and Silverblossom. Poisoned Sap stood at the base of the rock, looking up at Stormstar. Maplefur stood at a distance, his eyes glowing with pride.

"Poisoned Sap, you have proven your loyalty to ShadowClan," Stormstar meowed, looking down at her. "And so tonight, I am proud to name you a warrior." He paused. "Would you like to keep your rogue name, or take on a warrior name?"

The she-cat's eyes narrowed. "I'd like to keep my name, Stormstar."

"It does sound a bit like a warrior name." Depthwater pointed out. "I'd say it'll do fine."

"Does it matter what she's called?" Cliffshade meowed. "She saved Dewpaw single pawed!"

Why won't Stormstar mention me and Ashcloud? Does he want the clan to focus on Poisoned Sap, to trust her? Looking around some more, Milkblaze spotted Ashcloud sitting near Cougarfoot, his tail twitching with irritation. *He deserves credit too. He helped attack the rogues, and ran back to camp for help.*

"I, Stormstar, leader of ShadowClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on this apprentice." He hesitated. "This is an unusual circumstance. However this rogue has proven herself to be one of us."

As Stormstar spoke, Milkblaze watched Ashcloud thoughtfully. *It's strange that Oil Tail didn't try to stop Ashcloud from going back for help... Almost as if the rogues wanted him to...* A sudden thought struck him.

"She has trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend her to you as a warrior in her turn."

And who sent him to get help? Poisoned Sap! Milkblaze's mind raced, the world around him blurring as he struggled to remember every detail of the attack. *Neither rogue tried to attack her! And what did Shredded Ivy say after Poisoned Sap killed Oil Tail? "That wasn't part of the"... The plan!*

"Poisoned Sap, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your clan, even at the cost of your life?"

The golden and brown she-cat glanced at Maplefur questioningly.

He gave her a nod of encouragement, and she purred smoothly. "I do."

It was all set up! Of course! Milkblaze's heart pounded hard in his chest as realization and fear scorched his veins like cold fire. *Poisoned Sap wanted to save Dewpaw, to earn Stormstar's trust! She asked Shredded Ivy and Oil Tail to come here and attack Dewpaw! And Poisoned Sap sent Ashcloud for help so that Stormstar himself would see her as a hero!*

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I name you a warrior, Poisonedsap. StarClan honors your courage and loyalty, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ShadowClan."

"Poisonedsap! Poisonedsap!"

The cats yowled and cheered around him. The sound of it roared in Milkblaze's ears, and he forced his frozen paws to stagger backwards, gasping in a mouthful of cold air. *I knew it! Poisonedsap is infiltrating ShadowClan! This has been her plan all along!*

Stormstar leaped down from the rock and rested his chin on Poisonedsap's head. "Thank you for saving Dewpaw," He meowed quietly. "I owe you my life."

A purr rumbled in Poisonedsap's throat, but she didn't respond. As Stormstar turned away, Maplefur stepped forward and purred, touching his nose to hers.

She's tricked Stormstar... She's tricked Maplefur... She's earned the trust of the clan! Milkblaze swallowed, his eyes stretched wide as he stared at Poisonedsap. She leaned back from Maplefur and turned her head. Milkblaze's blood froze cold with dread as the dark she-cat rested her amber gaze on him. He exhaled sharply and took a step back. Her eyes narrowed slightly. *She can see I'm afraid. She must know that I've figured it out.*

After a moment, Milkblaze narrowed his eyes back at her, trying to hide his fear while his heart drummed in his chest. The other cats in the camp seemed to disappear. All that existed was he and Poisonedsap, their eyes locked intensely in silent challenge. *You're*

up to something, Poisonedsap. And I'm going to find out what. You will not destroy this clan!

Chapter 3

The moon gazed down upon the forest as dark silhouettes headed through the trees. Stormstar led his clan to the gathering, Depthwater at his side. The leader and deputy spoke quietly together.

Milkblaze, who padded a little ways behind them, pricked his ears, straining to hear what they were saying. *They have to be talking about Poisonedsap.* A moment later he flattened his ears shamefully. *Mouse-brain. How rude to eavesdrop on my leader and deputy!*

However, murmuring around him confirmed that some of his clanmates were wondering just as much about what would happen tonight, after Stormstar would reveal to the other clans that Poisonedsap had become a ShadowClan warrior. Every cat in the clan knew the reaction wouldn't be good.

Two nights had passed since Poisonedsap's warrior ceremony. Milkblaze now knew without a doubt that the former rogue was up to something, that she had plotted with her former allies, Shredded Ivy and Oil Tail, in order to earn Stormstar's trust. Every hair on Milkblaze's pelt hissed at him to go to his leader and tell him this. *But he'd never believe me.* He thought with a sigh. *He'd ask for proof, and what could I say to convince him?*

Poisonedsap herself wasn't attending this gathering, which was unusual for a new warrior. But Stormstar felt he should tell the other clans about her first. If Poisonedsap appeared at fourtrees unexpectedly, cats might panic and even attack her before Stormstar could explain.

Milkblaze found himself looking over his shoulder back toward the camp as they traveled, his stomach churning nervously as he half expected to hear sudden yowls and cries. We left our elders, queens, and kits with a former killer! There are warriors who stayed behind, but what if Poisonedsap is plotting with more of Bone Shred's Gang? What if there's a group of bloodthirsty rogues waiting to

attack our camp when it's vulnerable, like now?

As the ShadowClan cats headed down the slope where fourtrees stood, he saw that WindClan, ThunderClan, and SkyClan had already arrived, many purring and murmuring in conversation. Gladestar, Ravenstar, and the newest leader, Strawberrystar, sat atop the great rock, quietly in their own discussion.

Three moons ago, Birchstar had lost his last life to an aggressive badger who had moved into ThunderClan territory. His deputy, Strawberryspots, had taken his place and earned her nine lives and name from StarClan. Though she wasn't as friendly as Birchstar had been, every cat could see she was a strong and respectable leader.

The other leaders certainly won't be happy about Stormstar's announcement. Milkblaze thought with a flicker of hope. *Perhaps the other leaders will force him to send Poisonedsap away?*

Up ahead, Stormstar paused and turned to his clan. "Remember," He meowed quietly. "No cat is to mention Poisonedsap before I announce it."

Milkblaze glanced around as his clanmates murmured and nodded agreement. As Stormstar carried on, the cats followed him into the clearing. Milkblaze shuddered and huffed out a stressed sigh. I'll feel better when tonight is over.

While Stormstar, Depthwater, Hawkfeather, and Dewpaw headed toward the great rock, the other warriors branched away from the group to speak to cats in other clans.

"Willowtail!" Poppywing purred and bumped heads with a light gray tabby. "How are things in WindClan?"

The she-cat curled her tail behind her. "Wonderful! Me and Icetail are expecting kits."

Copperpaw had rushed past the she-cat's toward a group of WindClan apprentices. "Hey, Scorchpaw! Petalpaw! Silverblossom says I'm close to completing my training!"

"Lucky!" Petalpaw stared at the older apprentice with round envious

eyes. "Me and Blazingpaw have barely started!"

Copperpaw gave the yellow splashed she-cat a friendly nudge. "Don't worry, it's worth the wait."

Where is Timberpaw? Milkblaze surveyed the crowd for his apprentice, but couldn't find him. A pelt brushed against his, and he turned to see that Ashcloud had joined him.

"There certainly are a lot of cats here tonight," Ashcloud commented. "I swear the clans get bigger each moon!"

Milkblaze briefly purred in response, though he continued searching the clusters of cats. "Have you seen Timberpaw?"

"Timberpaw?" Ashcloud followed his gaze and looked around. After a moment, he raised his white paw and pointed into the crowd. "There he is, with Flamepaw and a WindClan apprentice. I think his name's Sharppaw."

Looking in the direction Milkblaze was pointing in, sure enough, he spotted Timberpaw sitting beside Flamepaw. The brothers watched Sharppaw with interest as he demonstrated a battle move, swinging a dark forepaw in the air.

Milkblaze suddenly noticed two cats just behind the apprentices, a dark gray tom and a yellow tabby and white she-cat. He vaguely recognized them and narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. "Isn't that Howlstorm and Dandeliontail?" He meowed to Ashcloud, nodding toward them. "The cats from Bone Shred's Gang who joined WindClan?"

His clanmate looked at them and nodded. "I think so. You think they'll be surprised to hear about Poisonedsap?"

"Yes..." Milkblaze stared at the two cats thoughtfully. After a battle against Bone Shred's rogues, two of his cats, Howl and Dandelion, had been taken prisoner by WindClan. However in time, every cat realized they weren't terrible cats at all. Gladestar had allowed them to join WindClan and take warrior names.

If they were in Bone Shred's Gang, they must have known

Poisonedsap very well. If anyone knew her true nature, it was Howlstorm and Dandeliontail. *Stormstar told us not to tell any cat about Poisonedsap yet.* He thought with a prickle of guilt. *But if they have information about her, this could save our clan.*

He turned to tell Ashcloud where he was going, but the gray and white tom had his back to him now, speaking with Hickoryroot of ThunderClan. Milkblaze made his way through the crowd, ducking his head and saying "excuse me" multiple times. When he reached the apprentices, he paused, giving Timberpaw a friendly nod.

Timberpaw looked at him, his eyes brightening. "Sharppaw, this is my mentor, Milkblaze! He's a really great hunter."

The WindClan apprentice blinked politely. "It's nice to meet you."

Milkblaze purred in response, flicking his apprentice's shoulder affectionately with his tail before continuing toward Howlstorm and Dandeliontail. The two cats were speaking quietly to one another.

He hesitated before taking a step forward, dipping his head politely. "Excuse me." As the couple looked at him, he added, "You're Howlstorm and Dandeliontail, right?"

"That's right," Howlstorm replied, blinking questioningly. "You're a ShadowClan cat, right?"

"Oh." Milkblaze licked his chest in embarrassment. *I should have introduced myself right away.* "Yes, I'm sorry. My name is Milkblaze."

Dandeliontail purred politely. "It's nice to meet you, Milkblaze." She studied him with bright yellow eyes. "You're Rosebreeze and Maplefur's brother, aren't you? You all have creamy fur!"

Milkblaze couldn't hide his surprise. "You know my siblings?"

"Of course!" Howlstorm purred and gave him a nudge. "I'd even go as far as to say we're friends."

Dandeliontail nodded, her yellow eyes warm. "I'm sure we can be friends, too."

I have to admit I was a bit wary of talking to these two. MIlkblaze thought as he purred his agreement. *But they're very kind, kinder than most clanborn cats!*

"So how are things in ShadowClan?" Dandeliontail prompted, curling her fluffy tail over her paws.

Milkblaze hesitated. *Now is my chance.* He glanced around to make sure no cats were eavesdropping. Everyone seemed invested in their own conversations. "Actually, that's why I wanted to talk to you..." Howlstorm's eyes flickered with curiosity as Milkblaze leaned closer to him and his mate, lowering his voice. "Poisonedsap has joined ShadowClan."

"What?" Howlstorm inhaled sharply as Milkblaze drew back. He and Dandeliontail stared at him, mingled disbelief and shock in their eyes. "You can't be serious!"

"She would *never* do that!" Dandeliontail put in, her eyes wide.

Their reactions heightened his fears. *These cats knew her personally, and they're just as worried as I am!* "Well, she has." Milkblaze explained to them as quickly as possible how Poisonedsap had appeared in ShadowClan territory, begging for shelter. The two cats listened silently, their eyes as round as the moon above them as he went on to describe the attack on Dewpaw, and how Poisonedsap's heroism had convinced Stormstar of her loyalty.

When Milkblaze finished, Howlstorm and Dandeliontail were silent, staring at him in shock. "I'm convinced that she arranged for Shredded Ivy and Oil Tail to attack Dewpaw so that she could save him and earn Stormstar's trust," He meowed. "And-"

"You're right," Howlstorm interrupted, his green eyes narrowing. "Poisonedsap was Bone Shred's brother. No cat was more loyal or more bloodthirsty. She's killed more cats than you can imagine."

As Milkblaze's fur prickled with alarm, Dandeliontail nodded, her eyes round. "Howlstorm and I never killed any cat. We never wanted any part in violence and bloodshed. It's why we chose the life of a warrior."

Howlstorm nodded. "If Poisonedsap has joined ShadowClan, it isn't for the right reasons. It's for revenge. Something dark and twisted that only a cat like her could be after." He stared at Milkblaze with deep concern blazing in his eyes. "Milkblaze, ShadowClan is most definitely in danger. In fact, the whole forest might be."

The WindClan warrior's words sent chills up his spine. *This might be worse than I imagined... Poisonedsap could be planning something that puts every clan in danger.*

"Look, RiverClan has finally arrived!" Some cat meowed behind them.

RiverClan! Milkblaze was immediately reminded of an important detail he'd forgotten. He stared at Howlstorm and Dandeliontail. "Poisonedsap told us that Iceslide said that after Bone Shred was defeated, he would help her join RiverClan."

The couple exchanged a look of disgust and shock. "Iceslide was a good cat," Howlstorm growled. "He wanted to help *us* join RiverClan. Not Poisonedsap. She tried to kill him!"

That was all Milkblaze needed to hear. Everything Poisonedsap said had been a lie. And she was up to something terrible. He was about to speak again when the cats around him rose into confused meowing.

"Where's Shimmerstar?"

"Is she ill?"

"I only see Frostedcloud."

Milkblaze settled beside Dandeliontail and looked at the great rock. Frostedcloud, the RiverClan deputy, was heading toward it. He briefly nodded to the deputies, who gave him looks of confusion as he leaped up onto the rock with the other leaders.

"Frostedcloud, what are you doing up here?" Strawberrystar growled irritably. "And what took you so long?"

"Frostedcloud?" Stormstar blinked as the white tom turned to face

the clans, looking at his paws. "Where is Shimmerstar?"

The cats below had fallen silent now, waiting to hear what the RiverClan deputy had to say. There was no need to officially start the gathering.

After a moment, Frostedcloud raised his head and spoke. "Cats of all clans," He began, his voice sounding dry and tired. "I bring terrible news. Just this evening, Shimmerstar lost her last life and has joined StarClan."

There were gasps, cries, and sympathetic murmurs from cats of all clans. Shimmerstar had been RiverClan's leader for seasons, and every cat had respected her. Strawberrystar's eyes flashed with surprise, and she lowered her head, clearly regretting her distasteful greeting to Frostedcloud.

Milkblaze exchanged surprised looks with Howlstorm and Dandeliontail. *What happened? She seemed healthy at the last gathering!*

The other leaders were obviously thinking the same. Stormstar bowed his head, while Ravenstar and Gladestar murmured their condolences. "Shimmerstar was a great leader," He meowed quietly. "What happened to her?"

"She fell ill with greencough a few days after the last gathering," Frostedcloud explained solemnly. "Otterpelt spent the moon giving her treatment, however it wasn't enough. Shimmerstar died in her sleep tonight, just as we were preparing to leave. Otterpelt tells me that she would have died peacefully."

The cats murmured to one another quietly, but fell silent as Frostedcloud went on. "I grew up with Shimmerstar. I'll never forget how kind, fierce, and strong she was. She loved RiverClan and her kin more than anything." He paused. "She led us through the horrible war against Bone Shred's Gang, in which she lost so much, including her mate and kits. I hope that she is happily reunited with them in StarClan."

At the mention of Bone Shred's Gang, Milkblaze realized what

horrible timing it was, that on the night of Shimmerstar's death, Stormstar would announce that they'd accepted Poisonedsap into the clans.

Gladestar nodded quietly. "I assume your name is Frostedstar now?"

The white tom looked caught off-guard, looking to the WindClan leader. Milkblaze guessed this was the first time any cat had mentioned his leader name. "Err no, not yet. I haven't received my nine lives from StarClan, as Shimmerstar's death was earlier tonight. I will be visiting the Moonstone with Otterpelt tomorrow night."

The leaders nodded, and it was silent for a long moment. Frostedcloud gave himself a shake. "RiverClan has no further news," He said quietly, taking a step back.

"Thank you, Frostedcloud." Stormstar took his place at the front of the rock. "ShadowClan has some news to report." He hesitated, searching for the right words.

Here he goes... Milkblaze exchanged a look with Howlstorm and Dandeliontail.

"Last moon, we found one of Bone Shred's rogues, Poisonedsap, on our territory," Stormstar began. As the cats below rose into alarmed murmuring, he went on. "She wanted to put her past aside and join ShadowClan."

"What?" A RiverClan warrior named Duckwing exclaimed. "That's crazy!"

Stormstar ignored him and continued. "I wasn't sure of it at first. But this moon, Poisonedsap has proved herself a loyal and brave cat. Two rogues, formerly of Bone Shred's Gang as well, attacked our medicine cat apprentice, Dewpaw. Poisonedsap saved his life." He paused. "And so, a few nights ago, I allowed her to become a warrior of ShadowClan."

Not a moment passed before Milkblaze was surrounded by yowls and hisses of alarm and anger.

"What?" Frostedcloud leaped to his paws, his blue eyes blazing with

disbelief. "Stormstar, have you lost your mind?"

"Those cats were murderers!" Strawberrystar snarled. "And you let one stroll right into your camp?"

The RiverClan cats were clearly the most distraught. Dipfoot let out a hiss. "My son, Eelpaw, was killed by those rogues!"

"I lost my mate Frozenripple, and three of our kits!" Petalfin of RiverClan cried. "How dare you?"

Another RiverClan cat, Winterlight, leaped to her paws, her yellow eyes stunned. "I lost my whole family!" She exclaimed. "Grayshadow, Whitedapple, Blizzardfur, and Iceslide! Poisonedsap herself killed Blizzardfur!"

"Poisonedsap has changed!" Stormstar yowled back at her.

Winterlight's fluffy ears flattened. "So it's okay that she killed Blizzardfur?"

As Stormstar searched for a response, Frostedcloud took a step toward him, his eyes narrowed to slits. "You insult Shimmerstar's honor, and the honor of every cat who died at the paws of those rogues!"

"Everyone, calm down!" Ravenstar yowled, and the cats below slowly quieted, glaring up at Stormstar. "I understand, we're all angry and confused. Every cat lost someone to Bone Shred's Gang." He glanced at Stormstar, who studied him silently, ready to defend himself. "How Stormstar runs his clan is his own decision, and as long as it brings no harm to the rest of us, we should try to tolerate it."

Gladestar hesitated before adding, "Howlstorm and Dandeliontail were once followers of Bone Shred. But they are two of the best warriors in WindClan now. Perhaps the same can be said for Poisonedsap."

Milkblaze glanced aside at his companions as they were mentioned. Both of them looked uncomfortable to be examples that would convince the others to trust Poisonedsap.

"Thank you, Gladestar." Stormstar gave her a nod. "I believe that Poisonedsap will prove herself trustworthy to all of you in time."

Though Strawberrystar, Gladestar, and Ravenstar proceeded to share news as usual, the tension hung in the clearing, as though rather than cats, it were filled with foxes or prickly hedgehogs. Milkblaze's heart lurched as he stared up at his leader. *How am I ever going to convince him that Poisonedsap is dangerous?*

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Milkblaze burst into the camp and let out a horrified wail. *No!*

The sharp tang of blood hit him like a boulder until he wanted to throw up. The sky was an unnatural red that cast a matching hue over the camp. The thorn bushes dripped with blood, each drop adding to a gleaming red pool that encircled the clearing like a stream of death. Dead cats lay across the clearing, some in one piece, others not. The wails and screams of kits rang through the air like sirens.

Rosebreeze! Ashcloud! Stormstar! No! Milkblaze tried to run into the camp to search for survivors, or the kits in distress that seemed to be nowhere, yet everywhere. Yet he didn't run, only drifted forward as though he were underwater, struggling against an invisible current.

A sharp yowl echoed around him, and he shrank to the crimson ground as the sound pierced his ears, hot blood seeping into his belly fur. He looked toward the nursery, gasping in the iron tanged air.

Poisonedsap had emerged from the nursery, her body sleek with blood from head to tail. Her ragged tail dragged behind her, leaving behind an uneven trail of blood. His gaze following the trail into the shadows of the nursery. It led to a large pool of blood, and in it lay Maplefur, his body twisted and broken, his eyes wide and sightless.

"Maplefur!" Milkblaze screamed at his brother as tears welled in his eyes. To his astonishment, Maplefur raised his head slowly, the left

side of his face covered in blood. His piercing yellow eyes were fixed directly on Milkblaze. He opened his jaws to say something, only to release a thick mouthful of blood that plopped into the pool below his paws.

A low chuckle came from Poisonedsap as she stepped toward Milkblaze, grinning blood soaked teeth. *Poisonedsap! You did this!* He tried to yowl, but no sound came out. The blood soaked she-cat let out a screech that froze him to the ground in fear before she lunged at him, claws outstretched.

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A paw poked his side, and he leaped to his paws, snapping open his eyes and letting out a terrified hiss. "No!"

Poisonedsap and the bloody camp had vanished. Instead, he found himself in the warriors den. Timberpaw stood before him, retreating his paw back sharply as he stared at him, his eyes wide. "Whoa, it's just me! Are you okay?"

Milkblaze stared back at his apprentice, his heart sprinting like a rabbit in his chest. *It was just a dream... Just a nightmare...* "Yes, sorry." He drew in a shaky breath, relieved that the air was clean and not tainted with blood. "Just a bad dream." He forced his trembling legs to steady and shook scraps of moss from his fur. "What's going on?"

"It's time to go," Timberpaw replied. "I thought you'd be awake by now."

Go where..? Milkblaze blinked away sleep, his mind feeling fuzzy as he tried to remember.

Timberpaw looked amused. "Today is my assessment, remember? Flamepaw and Copperpaw are being assessed by their mentors too!"

Oh, that's right! "Of course." Milkblaze stretched out his forelegs. "Are they ready?"

The tabby apprentice nodded. "And guess what? Stormstar wants to watch us!"

"Really?" Milkblaze was surprised. *What an honor!* He followed Timberpaw out of the den, and sure enough, Silverblossom, Bluerain, Copperpaw, and Flamepaw were waiting. Bloomfire was there too. He guessed she was coming to support Flamepaw. Milkblaze's ears pricked as he saw Stormstar emerge from his den. I need to speak with him about Poisonedsap.

When they reached the group, Silverblossom purred. "Someone was tired, eh?"

"Yes," Milkblaze purred back, trying to push his nightmare to the back of his mind. "It was late when we returned from the gathering." He looked at Stormstar, who gave him a friendly nod.

"Silverblossom!" Crowmask suddenly called from the center of the clearing. "Come on. Copperpaw can come as well."

Depthwater, Rosebreeze, and Ashcloud stood near Crowmask, looking toward Silverblossom expectantly. Milkblaze realized that they wanted her to join their patrol.

Silverblossom pricked her ears and let out a purr to Copperpaw, who looked worried. "Don't worry, Depthwater must have forgotten. I'll go remind him about the assessments." As she turned away, Flamepaw began anxiously speaking to Bloomfire, and Bluerain and Timberpaw watched Silverblossom.

Stormstar was alone, waiting patiently. *Now is my chance...* Milkblaze pushed aside his worries and padded over to his leader. "Stormstar?" He meowed quietly. "Can I speak with you alone?"

The dark tabby twitched his ear. "We'll be leaving at any moment," He pointed out.

"I know." Milkblaze hesitated. "But this is important."

Stormstar frowned. "Alright." He turned and stepped a few fox lengths away from the others, and Milkblaze followed him. "What is it?" He asked as he turned to face the warrior.

Where do I start? Milkblaze wondered anxiously. He drew in a breath before speaking. "I think Poisonedsap sent those rogues to

attack Dewpaw." His leader's eyes narrowed, but Milkblaze pressed on. "Neither of them tried to attack Poisonedsap. Not once. And when she sent Ashcloud for help, neither rogue tried to stop him." He paused, inviting his leader to speak. When he didn't, Milkblaze continued. "After Poisonedsap killed Oil Tail, Shredded Ivy said it wasn't part of their plan. Poisonedsap faked the entire attack to earn your trust."

He expected Stormstar to argue with him, but there was no anger in his eyes. Only thoughtfulness. After a few moments, he spoke quietly. "Are you sure you heard right?"

"I'm certain." Milkblaze lowered his voice. "And there's more. I spoke to Howlstorm and Dandeliontail at the gathering last night. They told me that Iceslide never said anything about helping Poisonedsap join RiverClan. They told me she can't be trusted."

Stormstar nodded slowly, the tip of his tail twitching thoughtfully. "It was a good idea to speak to them." He meowed. "They know her well."

"Stormstar, I'm very afraid for ShadowClan," Milkblaze pressed on, staring at him urgently. "Poisonedsap is planning something, I know it. We have to do something, before it's too late."

The ShadowClan leader studied Milkblaze, who hoped he could see how real this threat was. After a long moment, Stormstar drew in a breath. "Perhaps I have been too quick to trust her." He meowed decisively. "After the assessment, I'll speak to Depthwater and Hawkfeather about this. And we'll watch her more closely."

Relief washed over Milkblaze like a wave of sunlight, removing the stress that weighed over him like a rock from his shoulders. "Thank you, Stormstar."

Stormstar dipped his head and rose to his paws, padding past him to greet his mate, Silverblossom. Milkblaze turned his head to watch them for a moment, then looked ahead. His heart nearly burst out of his chest.

Just a few fox lengths away from where Stormstar had been,

Poisonedsap sat, her dark eyes fixed on Milkblaze. Dread crashed over him like a wave. *How long has she been there? Did she hear our conversation?*

"Milkblaze, come on!" Timberpaw called excitedly. "We're leaving!"

Milkblaze met Poisonedsap's amber gaze, narrowing his eyes at her. *Stormstar knows now too. You won't be in this clan for much longer.* As if in response to his thoughts, Poisonedsap rose to her paws and went to the fresh kill pile. She pulled out a plump rabbit for herself and dragged it away into the shadows of the clearing.

"Milkblaze!"

"I'm coming." Glaring at Poisonedsap for a moment longer, he turned and followed the others out of camp.

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"Alright," Silverblossom meowed. "All three of you did very well."

Timberpaw, Copperpaw, and Flamepaw sat before their mentors, each proudly exhibiting two frogs at their paws. They had been out in the forest for a while now, and the apprentices had completed the first stage of their assessments. Stormstar sat beside Silverblossom, blinking approvingly at the apprentices.

"Your hunting crouch was great, Flamepaw!" Bloomfire purred.

"Thanks!" Flamepaw lifted his chin proudly.

Milkblaze nodded to Timberpaw, unable to suppress a purr of pride. "Well done!"

"Next, we want to see how well you can hunt in trees," Silverblossom continued. "You'll each need to bring back a thrush."

Hunting in the treetops isn't Timberpaw's strongest skill. Milkblaze thought worriedly. Looking at his apprentice, he never would have guessed. The young tom's eyes were glowing with determination. *He'll be a great warrior.*

The apprentices turned to begin their task when a growl sounded from the bushes nearby. The apprentices stopped in their tracks, while Milkblaze and the other warriors leaped to their paws, their ears pricked forward in alarm. He immediately sniffed the air. *Fox!*

Before he or any cat could speak, the huge orange furred creature emerged from the bushes, holding the half eaten carcass of a rabbit in its jaws. Its yellow eyes flashed with interest, and it threw the bloody carcass aside, baring its teeth at the cats. *It's huge!!*

Beyond it, Milkblaze spotted movement in the bushes, a black tipped brown tail. His heart skipped a beat as a horrible realization struck him. *Poisonedsap!* He remembered how just before they left the camp, she had taken a rabbit from the fresh kill pile. Great StarClan, she's led a fox to-

The fox snarled as it launched itself at Milkblaze. He let out a startled screech as it bit into his foreleg and ripped at his ear with dark claws.

"Milkblaze!" Bluerain charged at the fox and slashed her claws across its muzzle. It screeched and released Milkblaze, who scrambled away as the fox lunged for Bluerain.

As he rolled to his paws, he heard another snarl, followed by startled yowls from his clanmates. He looked up in horror as a second fox, just as big as the first, leaped at the apprentices. Silverblossom intervened, slashing at it. "Hold it off!" She shrieked.

A screech of pain sounded close to Milkblaze, and he spun to see that the first fox had sank its teeth into Bluerain's flank. "No!" He leaped onto the fox's back, digging his claws into its pelt, and it released Bluerain, yelping in pain.

Poisonedsap sent two monstrous foxes to kill us all! As the fox snarled and spun, trying to throw him off, he screeched at the apprentices. "Hurry, all of you, run!"

The three looked frozen, their eyes round with fear. "We can't just leave you!" Copperpaw protested.

As Milkblaze tore his claws at the fox's neck, he was vaguely aware in the chaos that Stormstar and Silverblossom were fighting the other fox together. Bluerain was badly wounded, and the apprentices were too afraid to fight, and he couldn't blame them. *But I can't defeat this fox alone!*

"Bluerain!"

As Milkblaze sank his teeth into the fox's ear, he saw two cats race into the clearing out of the corner of his eye. *Poppywing and Rainheart! Help me!* But the couple had rushed straight to Bluerain, who had collapsed now.

The fox howled furiously and gave a fierce spin, and Milkblaze gasped as his claws tore from the fox's pelt. He hit the ground with a thud, and when he staggered to his paws, he was alarmed to see the fox heading for the apprentices.

Flamepaw and Bloomfire were crouched in front of Timberpaw and Copperpaw, hissing defiantly at the fox as it closed in. With an angry bark, it lunged for Bloomfire, grabbing her leg.

"Let her go!" Flamepaw screeched and leaped onto the fox's head, biting and clawing at it.

As Milkblaze stood frozen, his leg and ear stinging from the attack, his mind was spinning. *Poisonedsap heard my conversation with Stormstar! She wants to kill both of us!*

Timberpaw's shriek of pain snapped him out of his thoughts, and he let out a gasp. No! The fox had clamped it's teeth around Timberpaw's tail, shaking him violently before throwing him headfirst into a tree. Timberpaw groaned, his eyes unfocused as he slumped against the trunk. The fox stalked toward him, growling lowly.

"Timberpaw needs help!" Rainheart yowled.

He's stunned! Before Milkblaze could react, Stormstar leaped away from the other fox. "Silverblossom, go!" He yowled in panic.

"But-"

"Go!" Stormstar charged at the fox that had crouched, ready to spring at Timberpaw. The ShadowClan leader leaped between the fox and Timberpaw, arching his back and snarling furiously. "You won't lay another claw on my clanmates!"

To Milkblaze's amazement, Stormstar lunged at the fox's throat and bit hard, blood shooting out onto his face. The huge fox let out a sharp yelp and fell onto its back, snapping and slashing at Stormstar, but the tabby leader didn't let go, ignoring the wounds that were inflicted on him.

When the fox went limp, Stormstar released it, spitting out a mouthful of blood and panting. Milkblaze couldn't take his eyes off his leader, admiration flashing through him. *I've never seen a cat kill a fox before!*

The other fox had frozen, staring at it's dead companion in shock. A heartbeat later, it screeched furiously and lunged for Stormstar. But instead of facing it, he spun and bolted through the trees, the fox snarling as it ran in pursuit.

Immediately, Milkblaze understood what he was doing. *He's giving himself up so that we can escape...* He trembled as he caught his breath.

"Stormstar!" Silverblossom shrieked after her mate.

We need to get out of here! Milkblaze panted and shook blood from his ear. "Come on, we all need to leave before it comes back."

Silverblossom turned on him, her eyes lit with bewilderment. "What are you talking about? We have to help Stormstar! He can't fight that fox alone!"

Sorrow for the old she-cat pierced his heart. She was too afraid for her mate to understand. He stared into her eyes sadly. "He knows that."

She stared back at him, struggling to understand what he was saying. After a moment, her head dropped, and she let out a sob of grief. *This must be his last life...*

There was a screech of agony in the distance, and Milkblaze recognized Stormstar's voice. He stared at his paws. He knew this was a sound he would never forget. His leader dying. He saw the distressed looks on his clanmates faces and knew they were all stunned and deep in grief.

Giving himself a shake, Milkblaze knew he had to take charge of the situation. "We need to leave." He let out a shaky sigh. "Quickly. Help the wounded."

While Copperpaw and Flamepaw helped Bloomfire to her paws, Silverblossom gently nudged Timberpaw, her voice cracking. "Come, we need to hurry."

Milkblaze took a step toward his apprentice, staring at him worriedly. He was trembling badly, his eyes wide and stunned. "B-but... Stormstar..." As Silverblossom gently guided him away, he whispered. "He gave his life for me..."

The cats began heading back toward the camp silently. Every cat seemed stunned. Milkblaze padded alongside Silverblossom as she moved slowly, staring at her paws. Right now, Milkblaze felt no anger, no fear. Only numbness as he processed one thing.

Poisonedsap is responsible for Stormstar's death.

Chapter 4

"We're gathered here today to honor the memory of Stormstar."

Milkblaze sat among his clanmates in a loose circle, his head bowed and eyes closed. Normally, a body would lay in the center, groomed by the clan medicine cat and surrounded by close kin. But no body had been recovered. Nevertheless, they held a vigil for their fallen leader, knowing he was with them in spirit.

Earlier that evening, Milkblaze and the others returned to camp. He had been the one to tell the clan what had happened, every detail from the sudden fox attack to Stormstar's noble sacrifice. And yet, he hadn't revealed one truth. Poisonedsap had led the foxes to them.

Depthwater, who would take Stormstar's place, stood on the meeting rock, his blue eyes glistening in the darkness. "He was a strong, noble cat who I'm honored to have known all my life. He always put his clan first, and he led us bravely through the battles against Bone Shred's rogues."

Closest to the rock sat Stormstar's family. Silverblossom's eyes were distant and dull with grief. Beside her, Dewpaw and Diamondpaw sat close together. Diamondpaw rested her chin over her brother's head.

Watching the grieving family, Milkblaze felt his heart sink with guilt. *It's my fault...* He squeezed his eyes shut. Poisonedsap must have overheard my conversation with Stormstar. *Maybe she thought the foxes would kill both of us.* He raised his head slightly and parted his eyelids. Across the clearing, Poisonedsap sat beside Maplefur, her head lowered respectfully.

If you're truly upset about anything, it's that I wasn't killed too. Milkblaze narrowed his eyes to slits as he watched the dark she-cat. *You're a murderer. And I could tell the whole clan right now, but I won't disturb Stormstar's vigil.* He also had a feeling Poisonedsap was

prepared for him to make the accusation. She would deny it or twist his words. *I need to be careful about this. I need a plan.*

"I never thought this day would come. I don't think I, nor any cat could become such a great leader as Stormstar was." Depthwater was meowing. "But I will take on the duties he has passed on to me and protect ShadowClan, the cats that he cared for so much." He lowered his head. "May you find good hunting, swift running, and shelter when you sleep."

Stormstar was going to talk to Depthwater and Hawkfeather about Poisonedsap. Milkblaze thought anxiously. *But he never got the chance. How will I ever convince them? As far as they know, Stormstar died believing she saved Dewpaw's life. Would they believe me if I said otherwise, or think I'm disrespecting Stormstar's memory?*

Breaking out of his thoughts, he realized that Silverblossom had begun speaking. "Stormstar was the bravest, strongest cat I ever met," She rasped. "He was the best mate any she-cat could ask for, and a wonderful father. I already miss him dearly, but one day we'll hunt together once more in StarClan."

Her words sent a throbbing in his heart. *Silverblossom is very strong and wise, but still one of the oldest warriors in the clan. She may be joining Stormstar very soon...*

"My father was kind, brave, and cared for his clan above all," Dewpaw spoke quietly. "I'm proud to be his son. I know that he is safe and happy in StarClan, and I'll see him again at the moonstone."

The medicine cat apprentice stepped back, giving his sister a tiny nod. Diamondpaw raised her head, her blue eyes glistening. "Stormstar was a great father and leader," She murmured. "I miss him so much already. I-"

As the young she-cat continued, Milkblaze noticed Poisonedsap raising her head. Her amber eyes were narrowed at the apprentice. After a moment, she moved her gaze to his. Milkblaze stiffened, suppressing a growl as he locked eyes with her, hoping she could sense his hatred. *You killed my leader. You're going to pay for this.*

Poisonedsap didn't remove her dark eyes from his threatening stare. Beside her, Maplefur glanced over worriedly. He followed her gaze to Milkblaze, and his ears flattened. Milkblaze looked at his brother, his anger melting away into deep concern. *Oh, Maplefur, if you knew what I knew...*

Suddenly, Poisonedsap rose to her paws, dragging her gaze away from Milkblaze and turning. He watched in disbelief as she headed toward the warriors' den, her tail lashing behind her. *She's leaving... In the middle of Stormstar's vigil!*

Maplefur had turned to watch Poisonedsap, obviously surprised to see her leaving. After a moment, he returned his attention to the vigil.

As the she-cat disappeared into the shadows, Milkblaze stared after her, his eyes narrowed to slits as fury rose inside him. He unsheathed his claws and dug them into the cold ground, resisting the urge to follow her. *You piece of fox dung..! I won't let you get away with this!* His head pulsed with anger. *I'll die before I let you harm another cat in this clan!*

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"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather for a clan meeting!"

Milkblaze's ears flicked as he awoke to Depthstar's yowl. He raised his head drowsily. Early morning light shone through the branches of the den. *It's early for a meeting.* He thought, puzzled.

A moon had passed since Stormstar's death. Depthstar had become the leader of ShadowClan. To the surprise of many, he had chosen the young warrior Cobratail as deputy. But he was quickly proving to be a great choice. The black and red tom had knowledge and skill beyond his age.

Timberstorm, Flameheart, and Copperstripe had become warriors. During the ceremony, Timberstorm had requested his warrior name in memory of Stormstar, who sacrificed himself for him during the fox attack. Depthstar had honored his request. Milkblaze couldn't

have been prouder of his former apprentice.

As Rosebreeze brushed past Milkblaze, he rose to his paws, blinking away sleep as he followed her out of the den.

The rest of the clan slowly streamed out of their dens into the clearing, murmuring to one another and staring at something in confusion. To Milkblaze's surprise, three strange kits were crouched below the meeting rock. A white she-cat, a tabby tom, and a white pawed black tom huddled together, their eyes huge with fear.

Milkblaze stepped to Rosebreeze's side and whispered. "Are those kits? What do you suppose they're doing here?"

She shook her head, just as puzzled. "I've never seen them before, Milkblaze."

Across the clearing, Cougarfoot bristled. "They smell like rogues!"

The golden tom's words sent unease prickling through Milkblaze's fur. *Did these kits come from Bone Shred's Gang? Does Poisoned Sap know something about them? Is this part of her plan?* He immediately searched the crowd for the she-cat and spotted her sitting close to Maplefur. But she looked uninterested in the kits, occupied with grooming herself.

On the meeting rock, Depthstar began to speak. "Cats of ShadowClan, I'm sure some of you have noticed the arrival of these three kits." He gestured with his tail toward them.

Milkblaze watched them, feeling a pang of sympathy as the three pressed closer together, looking around as though they were surrounded by foxes. *They look so scared!*

Depthstar continued speaking. "Their mother came outside the camp not long ago, seeking food and shelter for her starving kits." He paused. "I have decided to allow them into the clan."

As the clan murmured sympathetically, Rosebreeze spoke up beside him. "Poor things!"

Milkblaze couldn't agree more. A wave of sadness washed over him

as he stared at the orphaned kits. *They've lost their mother and their home... It doesn't look like they have a father either.* He looked at his paws. *They must feel so alone...*

Ashcloud stood. "Is that a good idea?" He asked. "What if they're from Bone Shred's gang?"

Depthstar dipped his head. "I have considered that, Ashcloud. But these kits don't carry the scent of twolegplace."

The gray and white tom hesitated, but seemed satisfied with this response. Most seemed to agree with Depthstar, while a few exchanged uncertain looks.

"Hasn't ShadowClan let in enough rogues lately?" Cliffshade asked roughly, glaring across the clearing. "We already have Poisonedsap to worry about!"

Milkblaze looked toward his clanmate in surprise. *So I'm not the only one who doesn't trust her!* He couldn't help but feel relieved. *Should I tell Cliffshade what I know? If there are others on my side-*

"Don't be ridiculous!"

To Milkblaze's dismay, Maplefur had leaped to Poisonedsap's defense, glaring at the gray and brown warrior. "Poisonedsap has been with us for two seasons now! She helped feed our clan through the rest of leaf-bare, and she's an excellent hunter. She's proven herself over and over."

"Don't be so sure of yourself, Maplefur," Cliffshade snapped. "That cat doesn't belong here!"

Maplefur leaped to his paws angrily. "Say that again!" He spat.

Maplefur, what are you doing?! Milkblaze held his tongue as frustration burned through his fur. *Stop defending that murderer!* Behind his brother, Poisonedsap watched, her eyes flashing with amusement. *I bet she wants to see Maplefur and Cliffshade fight to the death!*

"That's enough!" Depthstar snarled. "Maplefur is right. Poisonedsap

has proven her loyalty to us. She is to be respected and trusted just the same as every other clanmate."

Milkblaze stared up at his leader in disappointment. *How can he be so blind?* He looked toward Cliffshade, half hoping he would argue. But the hot headed tom said nothing.

Poisonedsap dipped her head. "Thank you, Depthstar."

"Milkblaze?"

He turned and saw Rosebreeze staring at him warily. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." He blinked. "Why?"

"You were growling."

I was? Milkblaze suddenly became aware of his tail lashing behind him. He drew in a deep breath and tried to calm himself. "I-I'm fine," He repeated.

"There is no reason to be suspicious of these newcomers. They're only kits, and pose no threat to our clan." Depthstar stared down at his clan. "Would any of you like me to send them away to starve to death?"

Of course, no cat objected. "Right." The ShadowClan leader went on. "The kits don't appear to be six moons old yet, and will need to stay in the nursery for a couple moons." He looked to the two queens by the nursery. "Sunflower? Greenpine? Would one of you care for the kits until they are apprenticed?" He paused. "Sunflower, I know you already have your paws full with our three."

Milkblaze remembered that Depthstar was the father of Sunflower's kits: Snakekit, Brownkit, and Blackkit. *Can she really care for six kits at once?* He shuddered. *I wouldn't even want one!*

For a moment, Sunflower looked at the three sympathetically. "Of course I'll take them in," She murmured.

"I can at least help look after them until my kits are born,"

Greenpine added.

Depthstar dipped his head. "Thank you. They have lost their mother and deserve to be loved and comforted." To the rest of clan, he added, "Please welcome these kits, and make them feel safe among us."

***

Several days had passed since the kits had joined the clan. Their names were Deserve, Boost, and Song. Though Sunflower was caring for them and her kits played with them, Milkblaze could see the fear and sadness in their eyes whenever they stepped out of the nursery. They seemed to be slowly adjusting to clan life. It couldn't be easy for them.

Just last night, Silverblossom had joined StarClan after her patrol was attacked by a badger. The entire clan was devastated at the loss of the beloved she-cat. Milkblaze couldn't help but suspect that Poisonedsap had been responsible. But he had a feeling at this point, he was becoming paranoid. *As if Poisonedsap has control over every creature in the forest!*

It was dawn now. Milkblaze emerged from the warriors' den, blinking away sleep. Birds twittered quietly in the trees as the sun rose over the forest. *It looks like a great day for hunting. I wonder if Cobratail has already sent out the dawn patrol?* He started toward the deputy to ask.

"Sunflower!" The sharp cry of a kit sounded from beyond the thorn barrier. "Sunflower!"

As Milkblaze stopped in his tracks, Brownkit burst into the camp, panting. His short kitten legs trembled under him, and his yellow eyes were huge with terror. *What's going on?* He started toward the kit, but Sunflower had already shot out of the nursery.

"Brownkit!" The ginger tabby queen gasped. "Why were you out of the camp?"

Cobratail rushed over. "You're in big trouble, Brown-"

"It's Snakekit!" Brownkit's voice rose into a wail. "He's *dead!"*

For a heartbeat, no cat spoke, stunned by the kit's words. *"What?"* Sunflower shrieked in disbelief. "How- No-"

"Deserve did it!" Brownkit staggered backwards and spun, disappearing into the bushes. Thorns scraped the kit's pelt, but he didn't seem to notice. "Hurry, come on!"

Deserve? Milkblaze stared in bewilderment as Sunflower and Cobratail took off after the kit. *A kit killing another kit? That's impossible! Kits are innocent!* He charged after the two cats. *Brownkit must be mistaken!*

A little ways past the thorn barrier, Milkblaze picked up the scent of blood. A heartbeat later, Sunflower halted and let out an earsplitting wail of grief. "No!"

Milkblaze looked past her and took a step forward, his breath caught in his throat. *Oh, StarClan...!*

The tragedy before him was beyond anything he had ever seen. Snakekit lay on his side in the grass, his green eyes wide and sightless. His jaws were parted, as though he'd been wailing, tiny white kit teeth showing. His white neck fur was soaked in blood. The sight of a kit laying dead with a throat wound was so horribly wrong, so unnatural. It sent chills up Milkblaze's spine.

Blackkit was huddled against his brother's body, trembling uncontrollably. Sunflower rushed to his side and curled herself around both her sons, wailing and crying in distress.

"How..." Cobratail seemed stunned that another kit would commit such a crime. He looked sharply to Boost and Song, who were huddled together in a clump of bracken, whimpering. "Where is Deserve?" He demanded.

For a heartbeat, neither kit responded. They looked frozen. At last, Song spoke, her voice shaking. "H-He ran a-away..."

Before Cobratail could respond, Sunflower swung her head. "You three!" She shrieked and started toward the kits. "I knew you were

trouble! You're *monsters!*"

"W-we didn't do anything!" Boost wailed, pressing close to Song. "Please-"

Sunflower snarled and raised an unsheathed paw. *She's going to attack them!* Milkblaze realized in horror. Sunflower had always been a kind, gentle cat. But one of her kits had just been killed. Motherly instinct and grief had taken control of her.

He shot forward, but Cobratail was faster. The deputy shouldered her aside. "Sunflower, no!"

The ginger queen staggered and nearly lost balance before she swung to face him, baring her teeth. "Snakekit is dead because of them!"

Milkblaze refused to believe that the two trembling kits held any responsibility for Snakekit's death. He stepped in front of them, eyeing Sunflower warily.

"I can't imagine how you must feel, Sunflower," Cobratail meowed gently. "But you would never harm a kit."

Sunflower stared back at him, her tail lashing slowly while her eyes remained dazed, processing Cobratail's words. After a moment, her head dropped and she let out a long cry of grief.

The black and red deputy touched his tail to her shoulder in a gesture of comfort, then rested his solemn gaze to Milkblaze. "We'll return to camp now and tell the clan what has happened."

Cobratail led the way with Sunflower slowly following, her head low and tail dragging behind her. She carried Snakekit's tiny body by the scruff. Blackkit and Brownkit stayed close to their mother, whispering and sobbing.

Milkblaze turned to Boost and Song. Sympathy struck his heart like thorns. The two kits hadn't moved a muscle. "Come on," He meowed quietly. "We're going back to camp."

Song stared up at him, her tiny pink nose quivering. "I-I don't want

to!" She cried and pressed her face into her brother's shoulder.

"Depthstar is going to kill us!" Boost whimpered against her. "I don't want to die!"

Milkblaze's heart broke as he stared down at them. "I promise, no cat is going to kill you," He murmured. "Come on."

The kits exchanged a fearful look before stepping out of the bracken on wobbly legs. As they headed back to camp, he heard them whispering behind him.

"Where did Deserve go?" Song whimpered. "Did he really leave us..?"

Boost spoke in a low sob. "Our family was supposed to stick together, but all it's been doing is falling apart."

"Deserve is a murderer!" Song whispered. "The clan will kill us! I know it!"

Boost's voice cracked as he spoke. "At least we'll die together."

Hearing such a dark and tragic conversation between kits tore Milkblaze's heart in two. *I don't understand why their brother has done this... But they're innocent in all of this.*

When they entered the camp, they were greeted by shrieks of alarm and confusion.

"Is that Snakekit?" Copperstripe exclaimed.

"Oh, StarClan no!" Greenpine cried from near the nursery.

Crowmask's eyes widened. "Did one of those foxes get him?"

Sunflower gently lowered her kit onto the ground as cats surrounded her, gasping and crying out their questions. Beyond them, Depthstar had emerged from his den to see what the commotion was about. The moment he saw his son's body, his eyes lit with horror, and he shot across the camp, pushing his way through the crowd.

"No...!" Depthstar stared down at the limp kit, seeming frozen. "Snakekit, no..." Sunflower sobbed and pressed her head into his dark chest fur while Brownkit and Blackkit huddled against their father's legs.

Cobratail stood a little ways from the family. Many cats stared at their deputy, waiting for him to reveal what had happened. But Milkblaze could see that Cobratail was respectfully giving Depthstar and his family a moment to grieve.

Milkblaze sat down, and Rosebreeze rushed to his side, her amber eyes round. "What happened?" She gasped.

"Cobratail will explain," He responded quietly. He looked over his shoulder and saw Boost and Song crouched near the thorn bushes, too afraid to step out into the open. *I won't push them, but I think the clan will be suspicious if they hide like that...*

It wasn't long before Depthstar raised his head and stared at his deputy. "Cobratail," He rasped. "What happened? Who did this?"

Cobratail hesitated. "Depthstar, I... I don't know how to say this. But... It was Deserve."

"Deserve?" Cougarfoot stared at him in disbelief. "That black kit with white paws?"

"That's right," The deputy meowed. "He-"

Cliffshade rose to his paws. "I'm sorry, but are you trying to tell us that a *kit* has *killed* another kit? That's crazy!"

"Well, he did!" Brownkit's wail rang across the clearing, and every cat fell silent. "He attacked Snakekit, bit his throat, and..." He broke into a sob, and Sunflower pulled him close with her tail, her eyes squeezed shut.

Depthstar looked stunned. His eyes darkened. "Where is Deserve now?"

"The kits say he ran away," Cobratail meowed. "Shall I send some cats to find him?"

"Of course!" Greenpine exclaimed. "He's just a kit out there on his own!"

Crowmask glared at the queen in disbelief. "That kit is a murderer! I say let him go, far away from us!"

Several cats murmured agreement, but Bluerain spoke up. "We promised the mother of those kits that we would care for them! Deserve belongs in the nursery with Sunflower and-"

"No!" Sunflower raised her head sharply, her eyes blazing in a mixture of fury and heartache. "That kit does not belong in ShadowClan!" She glared past Milkblaze where Boost and Song were crouched. "And neither do *they*!"

As she spoke, every cat noticed the two kits hiding in the shadows. "Those two!" Crowmask growled. "Did they help Deserve?"

"They're rogues! Of course they did!" Cliffshade hissed.

Depthstar's dark blue eyes were narrow. "Boost, Song! Come out, now."

Milkblaze watched worriedly as the kits slunk forward into the clearing, their eyes wide with terror. *Surely Depthstar won't be too hard on them?* He couldn't be sure. *He just lost one of his kits.*

"Did you know anything about this?" The clan leader demanded. "Was this something you planned with your brother?"

Boost gulped. "N-no!" He cried.

"We never thought he'd do something so terrible!" Song added in a wail.

"We can't trust them, Depthstar!" Cougarfoot growled. "The last thing we need are kit murderers!"

"We never should have taken them in!" Crowmask added. "Exile them!"

Sunflower's ears were flat as she glared at the kits. "I'm no longer

caring for them! I want them out of my sight!"

Milkblaze looked from clanmate to clanmate in disbelief as they began closing in on the kits, hissing and growling suspiciously. Boost and Song were pressed tightly together, their little tails tucked between their legs as they wailed in terror. *Those poor kits don't deserve this!*

Without thinking, he shot forward and stood over the two trembling kits, glaring around him. "All of you, stop! They're afraid!" He yowled.

Crowmask snorted. "Do you think Snakekit wasn't afraid when they killed him?

Milkblaze flashed a glare at the black warrior. "Song and Boost are not responsible for what Deserve did!" He suddenly became aware of Depthstar's attention fixed on him. "Depthstar," He quickly meowed. "What happened to Snakekit is terrible, and I'm so sorry. But Deserve is to blame." He felt a strange feeling of responsibility as he stood protectively over the kits. "Please, let them stay in ShadowClan. Would you send two helpless kits to their deaths?"

His leader stared back at him for a long moment. Milkblaze felt a pang of regret as he wondered if he had offended him. But looking down at the kits between his forepaws, he decided it didn't matter. Only the lives of these kits.

"If they stay," Depthstar spoke slowly at last. "I will be keeping a close eye on them. And some cat needs to care for them until they're apprenticed."

Sunflower pointedly turned away, her decision clear. "I don't want them in the nursery at all, where they can harm Blackkit and Brownkit."

By the nursery, Greenpine hesitated before shaking her head. Clearly she was busy with her three kits.

Depthstar moved his gaze across his clan. "Well? Would any other she-cat be willing to care for Boost and Song?"

A few cats murmured uncertainly, but no one spoke up. Milkblaze blinked in disbelief. *Are they really afraid of these kits? Or just unwilling to raise them?*

A whimper between his paws caught his attention, and he looked down. Boost and Song trembled against his legs. "No one wants us here..." the little tom whispered.

"I'm scared. What do we do now?" Song cried.

Milkblaze's heart broke, and he suddenly became overwhelmed with emotion as the kits looked up at him and met his gaze with huge, petrified eyes. In that moment, he understood why some cats wanted kits. How important they were to the clan. What it felt like to be a father. *They're so innocent... These kits need to know that they're not alone. That they're loved.*

"Well?" Depthstar twitched an ear. "If no cat is willing to take them in, then-"

"I will." Milkblaze looked up from the kits and met his leader's gaze calmly. A few cats snorted in amusement, while others gasped.

"What?" Bluerain blinked. "You're a tom!"

"So?" Milkblaze grew defensive as he glanced around at his clanmates. "I'm capable of being a loving parent." Hearing these words come out of his own mouth felt strange. *I never thought I'd want to be a father. Yet I can't deny what I'm feeling right now.*

As the clan murmured in commentary, Depthstar studied him. "If you're sure about this, Milkblaze, I will allow it. But you must not let it get in the way of your warrior duties." He cast a sympathetic look at his mate. "And if Sunflower doesn't want them in the nursery, I need you to respect that."

"I understand." Milkblaze dipped his head. *Where will they go then?* He silently wondered. He decided it didn't matter right now. *The kits are safe.*

The ShadowClan leader drew in a shaky breath. "It's time to prepare for Snakekit's vigil."

As the clan dispersed into smaller groups, Depthstar spoke quietly to Sunflower, his eyes dull with grief. A few cats cast Milkblaze amused or suspicious looks. But he caught Ashcloud's eye, and his friend gave him a nod of approval. Glancing over his shoulder, Rosebreeze watched him, her eyes warm.

Milkblaze looked down at the kits, who still huddled between his paws. For a heartbeat, he didn't know what to say. "It's okay," He murmured. "You're safe."

Song slowly stepped out and turned, staring up at him with round blue eyes, while Boost followed more cautiously. "T-thank you..." He squeaked.

His sister looked nervous. "Are you really going to take care of us?"

Milkblaze felt something tug at his heart as he gazed down at the two kits. "I am." *I think my life is about to change... And it feels right.*

Chapter 5

The sun rose over the quiet forest, a blinding eye gleaming between the trees and branches. Cobratail stood in the center of the camp, his dark red fur vibrant in the morning light. "Would any cat like to go on the dawn patrol?" The deputy asked. "Fresh scent markers need to be left on the ThunderClan border."

Only about a quarter of the clan was awake. Ashcloud and Copperstripe spoke quietly by the fresh kill pile, which was looking low. Rosebreeze, Poppywing, and Bloomfire were laying outside the warriors' den, purring to one another.

Milkblaze sat near the elders' den, his ears pricking forward at the deputy's words. *I wish I could go on patrol... It's such a nice morning.* His paws itched to get out of camp.

Two days had passed since Milkblaze had decided to take in Boost and Song. Some cats like Greenpine, Ashcloud, Rosebreeze, and Poppywing were kind to Milkblaze and the kits. But it was obvious that most other cats disapproved for multiple reasons.

"She-cats should be raising kits," Cliffshade had grumbled yesterday. "Not toms."

The elder Foxshine had jumped in. "There's no harm in toms raising kits! What concerns me is that Milkblaze is young, and he's never even been a father. What does he know about raising kits?"

Rainheart was next to offer his opinion. "I'm young, and Poppywing and I will be having kits soon. Does that mean I'm not ready?"

"Or any tom who hasn't had kits before?" Flameheart added.

Foxshine had hesitated. "That's different."

"I'm sorry, but I think you're all forgetting the obvious issue here." Crowmask had growled, and every cat turned to him. "We have two

dangerous kits in ShadowClan!"

The arguing had continued until Depthstar and Cobratail broke them up, encouraging everyone to return to their duties. Milkblaze tried not to be offended by the opinions of his clanmates. But he couldn't help but wonder if they had a point.

I've never been a father before. I never even wanted to raise kits. Milkblaze thought. *Do I know how to care for them properly? What if this is a mistake?* He looked over his shoulder into the elders' den.

Since Sunflower refused to let Milkblaze and the kits move into the nursery, he'd had no choice but to turn to the elders. To his gratitude, they had allowed he and the kits to have a nest of their own in the elders' den. Carrottail and Bluerain were kind and seemed to enjoy having the kits around. Buzzardglare and Foxshine seemed a bit uncomfortable, but didn't object.

Right now, Boost and Song were curled up against Bluerain. The silver spotted she-cat had her tail wrapped around them as she looked down at them. The two kits were silent, their eyes dull and parted slightly as they stared at nothing.

Milkblaze saw very quickly that Boost and Song didn't behave like other kits. At least, not anymore. They didn't seem to have any energy or a spark of happiness left in their bodies. *This whole experience has shaken them.* He thought as he watched them. *And I don't know how to talk to them about it.*

He stared at the kits over his shoulder for a moment longer before rising to his paws and turning, heading into the elders' den. Buzzardglare and Carrottail were still asleep. Foxshine quietly groomed herself while Milkblaze paused in front of Bluerain, who blinked a greeting to him.

Milkblaze looked down at the kits and hesitated. "It's morning now," He told them.

Song's blue eyes flicked up to him, though she didn't move her head.

"Um..." He desperately searched for his next words. *Great StarClan, I have no idea how to talk to kits!* "It's a nice day. Do you want to play in the clearing?" Boost gave a tiny shake of his head. "No?"

Neither kit spoke. Milkblaze raised his gaze helplessly to Bluerain, who looked sympathetic. *She knows that I'm trying.* He shuffled his paws on the den floor as he thought. "You must be hungry," He meowed. "You haven't eaten since sunset yesterday."

For a while, he thought he wouldn't get a response. But the sound of a tiny stomach rumbling broke the silence, and Boost raised his head slightly. "I'm kinda hungry..." He mumbled.

"Oh, alright." Milkblaze grew hopeful. *An appetite is a good sign!* "We can go to the fresh kill pile then and fetch something. Are you hungry too, Song?"

The little white kit hesitated before nodding.

"Okay, come on." Milkblaze's spirits lifted as he turned toward the mouth of the den, watching over his shoulder as the kits slowly hobbled out of the nest. As he stepped out into the clearing, Song let out a squeak. He looked back in surprise. "What's wrong?"

Both kits were crouched in the entrance of the den, staring ahead with frightened eyes. "Won't someone yell at us?" Boost whimpered. "No one likes us anymore."

Milkblaze's heart throbbed with sympathy. He returned to the kits and crouched before them. "I promise, no cat will yell at you."

The kits exchanged a worried look. "C-can we stay close to you?" Song asked.

"Of course." Milkblaze was touched to hear that the kits felt safe with him. As he turned and continued toward the fresh kill pile, Boost and Song stayed close to his side, rapidly looking around as if they thought some cat would attack them. Milkblaze had to be careful not to trip over them, they stayed so close to his paws.

When they reached the fresh kill pile, Milkblaze plucked out a mouse by its tail and dragged it out in front of the kits. "Why don't

you share this?" He prompted. "I'll fetch you another if it's not enough."

Boost sniffed at the mouse. "Okay..."

"Thank you," Song added, and the two kits crouched, nibbling at the mouse. Milkblaze sat and watched them as they occasionally cast darted looks around the camp.

He looked up and felt his fur prickle. Several cats were watching them, murmuring to one another. Cougarfoot and Cliffshade studied the kits with their heads low, hissing to each other. By the meeting rock, Depthstar himself watched the kits with uncertainty.

"Look who it is," Cliffshade whispered. "The troublemakers."

"The murder kits." Crowmask narrowed his eyes. "I hope Milkblaze's kindness rubs off on them. The last thing this clan needs are murderers."

Milkblaze's tail lashed slowly in frustration. *We already have a murderer in this clan! Poisonedsap!* He wondered how his clanmates could be so blind, to accept a grown cat from a bloodthirsty gang, yet be suspicious of two innocent kits. *They've been through enough, and hearing cats whisper about them like this is only hurting them more.*

The kits confirmed his thoughts when they raised their heads from the mouse, and Boost nudged it away with his paw, dropping his gaze. "I'm not hungry anymore."

"Me neither," Song mumbled.

Milkblaze's heart sank. The mouse was less than half eaten. *I'm sure they're still hungry. They would have eaten more if they hadn't heard the clan whispering about them.* With a sigh, he picked up the mouse by its tail. "Let's go back to the elders' den," He suggested. "You can eat there."

The kits hesitantly agreed, and they headed to the elders den. When they entered, he saw that Foxshine had fallen asleep. Only Bluerain was awake. Seeing the half eaten mouse and the sad kits, she huffed out a sigh. "The clan didn't have kind words for them again?"

Milkblaze nodded, biting back his frustration. *They're a bunch of fox hearts.*

The kits started toward Bluerain, but the elder rose to her paws. "I'm going to stretch my legs in the clearing," She meowed. "Perhaps I'll give that Crowmask a piece of my mind while I'm at it!" She added with a purr, but the kits weren't amused.

"I'm sure Milkblaze can keep you company." She gave Milkblaze a look that he understood after a heartbeat. *She's purposely leaving to give me time to bond with them.* When the queen exited the den, Boost and Song looked up at him.

He grew nervous as pressure mounted on his shoulders. *You can do this. You can be a father.* He hesitantly settled in his nest and nudged the mouse toward the kits. "Try to eat the rest," He encouraged. "You need your energy."

"I'll try..." Boost mumbled.

As he and his sister slowly began to eat again, Milkblaze wondered what to do next. He tried to remember how Redblaze and Baconstripe cared for he and his siblings when they were kits. *They fed us, played with us, groomed us... They made us feel safe and loved. Can I really do all of that? It would be easier if I had a mate to help me. But I don't want a mate, at least not right now.*

When the kits sat up from the mouse, Milkblaze was glad to see that they'd eaten more than half of it. They looked up at him with sorrowful eyes, and his heart ached. *No kit should look like this... I wish I could help them.*

As a kit, if he, Maplefur, or Rosebreeze ever had a problem, they would talk to Baconstripe or Redblaze, and they'd solve it. *But great StarClan, our problems were missing mossballs, or burrs in our fur! Not losing a littermate and being accused of murder!* But what kind of father was he if he just ignored their struggles? He might not be able to fix it, but he could help them through it.

Milkblaze thought carefully before he spoke. "You must miss your brother," He meowed quietly.

The kits looked startled by his words, exchanging a look, and Milkblaze inwardly panicked, wondering if he'd been wrong to mention Deserve. But Boost responded.

"We miss him every day," He meowed, his voice cracking with emotion. "He was... Our brother."

Song's eyes glistened. "Everyone talks like he was a bad cat, but he wasn't! He was the best brother in the world."

Milkblaze's heart ached for them. "I'm sorry. I'm sure he was." *But then why did he kill another kit..?*

Boost looked at his paws. "Snakekit, Brownkit, and Blackkit were really mean to us," He rasped. "They even hurt us sometimes."

"Yeah," Song whimpered. "But we never wanted... I mean, we never imagined..."

"We never thought Deserve would kill anyone!" Boost blurted out and sobbed, pressing his head into Song's shoulder.

Milkblaze felt his heart break as the kits cried in front of him. Realization struck him as he thought about their words. *Sunflower's kits bullied them! That's what drove Deserve to kill Snakekit...* He was horrified as he thought about how serious it must have been to end so terribly. He rose to his paws. "We need to tell Depthstar about this." He decided.

Boost's head shot up. "No!"

He ignored the kit and started toward the mouth of the den. The next thing he knew, the kits had darted in front of him, and he staggered back before he tripped over them.

"Please don't, Milkblaze!" Song pleaded.

Milkblaze stared down at them. "Kits, this could help you!" He meowed gently. "It doesn't make what Deserve did right, of course. But it will give him a better understanding of why it happened."

"No!" Boost stared up at him desperately. "Then Brownkit and

Blackkit will be in trouble!"

Song took a pawstep forward as Milkblaze blinked in confusion. "Please, we don't want to hurt them any more!" She begged. "They're already so sad about Snakekit."

Emotion tugged at Milkblaze's heart as he stared down into the kits' round, pleading eyes. *These kits have suffered so much, and yet they still care about the ones who hurt them.* After a long moment, he sighed. "Okay," He murmured. "I won't tell anyone." He paused. "But if they hurt you again, you have to tell me, alright?"

"They won't. I know it." Boost meowed.

"I hope not." Milkblaze drew in a deep breath and sat down. "You know, I'm here for you. Whenever you need anything."

The kits relaxed a little. "We know," Song mewed quietly. "Thank you."

***

The next day, the kits seemed to be in better spirits. Milkblaze batted a ball of moss toward the kits. "Go get it!"

Boost and Song scrambled after it as it bounced across the clearing. Song pushed ahead of her brother and pounced, planting both forepaws down on the mossball.

"Well done!" Milkblaze purred, and Song looked up, a gleam of pride in her eyes. She picked up the ball in her teeth and started toward him, then paused, looking to the other side of the clearing as Boost bounced to her side.

Milkblaze followed her gaze and saw Blackkit and Brownkit sitting outside the nursery, looking bored or depressed. Song stared at them for a moment longer before slowly padding toward them.

What is she doing? Milkblaze rose to his paws and watched worriedly.

"Song?" Boost blinked and stared after his sister.

Brownkit and Blackkit seemed frozen, staring as Song paused a fox length away and set the mossball at her paws. "Hello," Her voice came out in a squeak. "Do you want to play mossball with us?"

The kits exchanged a nervous look. "N-no thanks," Blackkit mewed, while Brownkit took a step back.

"I'm sorry about Snakekit..." Song lowered her head and nudged the mossball toward them. "M-maybe we can-"

"You!"

Milkblaze froze as Sunflower shot out of the nursery, crouching in front of her sons and baring her teeth. "You stay away from them!"

As Song let out a terrified wail, Milkblaze bounded across the clearing and stood in front of her, glaring at Sunflower. "She was only asking to play, Sun-"

"Yes, I'm sure, with their throats!" The queen hissed, her yellow eyes blazing at him. "I told you, I don't want those StarClan-forsaken kits anywhere near Blackkit and Brownkit!"

Milkblaze knew there was no arguing with the grieving queen. "Song didn't mean any harm," He meowed carefully. "But we'll go." He looked back at Song, who trembled as Boost pressed to her side, staring up at Sunflower anxiously.

"Good." Sunflower narrowed her eyes as she swept her tail around Blackkit and Brownkit.

"Come on," Milkblaze meowed quietly, glancing at Sunflower before turning away, guiding Boost and Song away.

As they headed back toward the elders' den, Song looked up at him, her ears flattened. "I just thought they looked lonely..." She whispered.

Milkblaze blinked sympathetically. "It was very kind of you," He told her. "You didn't do anything wrong."

"Then why was Sunflower so mad?" Song asked.

"Sunflower is grieving."

Milkblaze looked up to see Hawkfeather stepping forward to meet them. "She isn't necessarily angry. She's lost one of her kits, so she's afraid and overprotective." The medicine cat paused. "Milkblaze, I'm afraid you can't stay with the elders anymore."

"What?" Milkblaze's fur prickled defensively. "Why?" *Have Buzzardglare or Foxshine said something?*

"Buzzardglare has caught a cold," Hawkfeather told him, to Milkblaze's surprise. "It would be dangerous if the kits caught it."

That makes sense. Milkblaze blinked at the medicine cat. "But Sunflower won't let us in the nursery... Where do we go?"

***

"Well, this is exciting, isn't it?" Milkblaze tried to sound cheerful. "You get to sleep in here before you're even apprenticed."

Night had fallen over the forest. Milkblaze was laying on his side in his nest in the warriors' den. He'd added extra moss in front of him where Boost and Song would sleep. The two kits looked around the den in wonder.

"Wow!" Song breathed. "It's even bigger than I thought!"

"Yeah! Let's explore! I'm not..." Boost broke off and yawned. "I'm not even tired."

Milkblaze purred in amusement, though inside, he felt nervous and awkward, sleeping with kits in the warriors' den. He knew some of his denmates wouldn't like it. Some would stare or whisper about them.

"Look how soft the moss is," Song whispered, kneading it under her white paws. "It's so different from hay."

Boost nodded, his eyes growing distant. "Hey, remember-"

"Milkblaze!" He heard Cougarfoot hiss from the shadows. "Will you

shut them up? I have dawn patrol tomorrow."

"Yeah, some of us are trying to sleep!" Copperstripe added.

Milkblaze felt a prickle of annoyance at his denmates, but knew they were right. "If we're going to stay here, we need to be quiet," He whispered to the kits. "So go to sleep."

The kits obediently yawned and curled up in the nest against each other. Milkblaze watched them for a long moment, purring quietly. He suddenly felt a gaze on him and looked up. Rosebreeze watched them from her nest, her eyes gleaming.

"What?" Milkblaze flattened his ears in embarrassment.

His sister purred. "Nothing. I just think it's cute." She rested her chin on her paws and closed her eyes. "Those kits are lucky to have you."

Milkblaze watched the kits for a moment before lowering his head to his nest and curling his tail around him. *And I'm lucky to have them.*

***

"What did I tell you?" A snarl awoke Milkblaze, snapping his eyes open. "Get away from the nursery!"

He raised his head, startled to see only Song curled up in their nest, blinking awake. *Boost!* He stumbled out of his nest and ran out of the den. Sure enough, the tabby kit was crouched outside the nursery, shivering in the darkness while Sunflower confronted him, hissing angrily.

"Hey!" Milkblaze rushed to Boost's side. "What's going on?"

Sunflower didn't take her eyes off of Boost as she snarled. "What's going on is, I woke up to this kit poking around my nest!"

"What?" Milkblaze blinked down at the kit in surprise. "Why were you doing that?"

Boost trembled as he stared up at him with glistening eyes. "I-I'm

really sorry! I just left something in there, and I need to get it!"

"You're not welcome in the nursery!" Sunflower hissed.

Milkblaze ignored the queen. "What did you leave in there, Boost?"

Boost looked at his paws. "Something really important..." He whimpered. "Please, I really need it..." He stared up at Milkblaze with hopeful, round eyes.

I don't understand what he could want... But his heart ached to see how important it was to him. He met Sunflower's defiant gaze. "May I go in and get it?"

A growl rumbled in the ginger queen's throat. "Fine," She snapped. "But don't disturb my kits." She stepped aside and kept her gaze locked on Boost, while Milkblaze slipped into the den.

Upon entering, Milkblaze realized he had no idea what he was looking for. *It must be something different from moss or branches...* Remembering how Sunflower said Boost was poking around her nest, Milkblaze crouched and shifted the moss with his paw, careful not to wake Blackkit and Brownkit. *I'll know it when I see it...* He was about to give up when he felt something rougher under his paw.

He dug the strange thing out of the moss and blinked down at it. He held a strange bundle of golden twigs in his claws. *No, not twigs... Grass? Pine needles? I've never seen anything like this in the forest.* He was sure this must be what Boost was looking for. Plucking it up in his teeth, he turned and exited the den.

The moment he appeared, Boost's ears perked up, his eyes lighting with joy. Milkblaze lowered his head and rolled the strange bundle toward him, and the kit leaped forward, hugging it in his paws and rubbing his cheek against it. "Thank you!"

Sunflower snorted. "Good. Now get away from here." She turned and whisked back into the nursery.

As Milkblaze headed back into the warriors' den, Boost held the bundle tightly in his jaws, moving quickly with purpose. Song brightened when she saw them. "You found it!" She whispered.

Boost climbed into the nest beside his sister and nudged the bundle toward her. She purred and gave it a nuzzle.

I don't understand. What's so special about this thing? Milkblaze settled in his nest again, blinking down at the kits. "So... What is that?" He asked curiously.

Boost looked up at him and exchanged a glance with Song before speaking quietly. "It's hay from our barn." He looked down. "Our old home."

Barn. Milkblaze was vaguely familiar with the word. It was a strange den like a twoleg nest, but twolegs themselves never lived in them. Only animals. He realized he knew very little about the kits' past. "Were you born there?"

"Yes," Song mewed quietly. "We lived with our family, and we were happy." She dropped her gaze to the bundle of hay, as though seeing memories through it. "But then... Then our father died. He got hit by a monster."

Milkblaze's heart broke as he stared down at them. *I had no idea...* "I'm so sorry..."

"Deserve wanted to hunt for us, because Dice- our father, taught him how," Boost murmured. "But our mother Velvet wouldn't let him. She couldn't hunt, and we were really hungry. So one day, she..." His voice cracked.

Song leaned against him reassuringly and stared up at Milkblaze. "She made us leave the barn, and took us here. She wanted to stay with us..." Her voice died into a whisper. "But Depthstar wouldn't let her. He didn't trust her."

Sympathy filled Milkblaze's heart, mixed with rising frustration. *We allowed Poisonedsap to join ShadowClan, but not Velvet? What a mistake!* He wondered how different things would have been if Velvet had taken Poisonedsap's place in ShadowClan. *Maybe Boost and Song would be happier. Maybe Deserve would still be here.* He wished he could find Velvet and tell her that her kits were safe and cared for.

"And now we've lost Deserve too," Boost whispered. "We have no idea where he or Velvet are. If they're alive or not." He looked down and pawed at the bundle of hay. "All we have to remember our family is this."

Milkblaze stared down at the kits, deeply saddened by their story. "I'm so sorry..." He murmured. "I would bring your family back if I could." He paused for a long moment, and the kits looked up at him with round, glistening eyes. "I know I'll never be your real father. But I want to be someone who you can trust and go to for help. At least, I'll try to be."

The kits stared at him for a long moment. "Thanks, Milkblaze." Song murmured. "You're already that cat."

Boost nodded agreement. "You make us feel safer than any other cat here," He whispered.

Their words touched Milkblaze, and to his surprise, the kits stepped forward and curled up against his flank. Song nuzzled her face into his fur while Boost pulled his bundle of hay close, squeezing himself between it and Milkblaze's body.

He stared down at them as they began to fall asleep against him, a purr rumbling in his throat. They were so small and innocent. They trusted him. This was a feeling he never thought he could feel. He gazed at Boost and Song as he curled his tail around them and slowly lowered his head to his paws, his heart swelling with emotion. *I'm a father now.*

Chapter 6

"Gotcha!"

Milkblaze felt ready to burst with pride as Boost rose from the undergrowth, holding a plump frog in his jaws. He looked back at Milkblaze with beaming eyes before he turned and hurried forward to meet him, his tail high.

"Well done!" Milkblaze purred as Song appeared behind her brother, holding up a vole for him to see. "You too, Song!"

Five moons had passed since that night Milkblaze had fallen asleep with Boost and Song cuddled against him. The siblings weren't tiny kits anymore. Two moons ago, they had begun their apprenticeships. To the surprise of many, Boost and Song had asked not to take apprentice names. Milkblaze knew that unfortunately, this decision would make ShadowClan even more suspicious of their commitment to the clan. But he had no doubt that by the time Boost and Song completed their training, they would prove their loyalties to their clanmates.

Ever since that night in the warriors' den, Milkblaze's relationship with Boost and Song had only grown stronger. The kits became less depressed every day they spent with him, playing, laughing, and feeling more and more at home in ShadowClan. Milkblaze loved them, and he had no doubt that the two felt the same about him. They were kin now, not bound by blood, but by something Milkblaze didn't know how to describe.

As Boost and Song prepared for their apprenticeships, Milkblaze had found himself growing more and more concerned. So few ShadowClan warriors trusted the kits. What if their mentors treated them wrongly? Crushed the spirit Milkblaze had worked so hard to build up in them? What if Poisonedsap mentored one of them? He wouldn't take the chance. And so he'd asked Depthstar if he could mentor one of the kits. He'd been relieved and overjoyed when his leader agreed and named him Boost's mentor.

The young warrior Copperstripe had become Song's mentor. Milkblaze was wary of him at first, but quickly saw that he treated Song just as he would any apprentice. He could trust him with her.

Copperstripe stepped to Milkblaze's side. "Great catch, Song!" He praised. "Your pouncing technique has really improved."

The young she-cat purred. "Really? Thank you!"

She's already an amazing hunter. Milkblaze thought proudly as he gazed at his foster daughter. *She'll be an excellent warrior. So will Boost.* He looked past the apprentices where the dawn sky was brightening. They had gone out for training very early today.

"I think it's time we head back to camp," Copperstripe meowed suddenly, as if reading his mind.

"Yes," Milkblaze agreed. "You two did very well today. I bet you're hungry!"

As he finished speaking, Boost's stomach rumbled. "I'm starving!" He mumbled around the frog.

Milkblaze purred in amusement and turned away, flicking his tail. "Come on, then. Make sure you bring your prey to the queens and elders before you eat anything," He quickly reminded them.

"We know," Song purred. "Voles are Bluerain's favorite, so I'm bringing this one for her." She and Boost hurried ahead toward the camp while Milkblaze and Copperstripe followed more slowly side by side.

"Those two have more energy than a couple of rabbits," Copperstripe chuckled before looking to Milkblaze. "You must be proud of them."

Milkblaze nodded, his heart warming as he watched the apprentices disappear through the thorn tunnel. "More than you can imagine."

As the two warriors neared the thorn tunnel, a new scent drifted into Milkblaze's nose. *Blood...* He exchanged a look with Copperstripe, whose worried expression confirmed that he'd scented

it too. They quickly hurried through the thorn tunnel.

When they entered the camp, Boost and Song stood frozen with their backs to them a couple fox lengths from the entrance. Milkblaze stepped to Song's side and gasped when he saw the scene before him.

The clan had gathered in an unorganized circle, meowing to one another. Some looked angry, while others murmured sobs of grief. In the center of the clearing lay a ginger tabby she-cat, her throat soaked in blood. *Sunflower!*

Blackpaw and Brownpaw crouched beside their mother's body, their eyes glistening with grief. Depthstar was at their side, his nose pressed to his mate's shoulder. "My beautiful Sunflower..." He whispered.

"Depthstar," Crowmask growled. "What are we going to do?" The black warrior sat by the medicine den while Hawkfeather pressed cobwebs to his shoulder. Blood ran through his dark fur.

Milkblaze spotted Maplefur and hurried to his side. "What happened?" He whispered nervously. *Could Poisonedsap have done this?* He suddenly noticed the she-cat beside Maplefur, her expression unreadable. She caught Milkblaze's eye and narrowed her amber gaze, as if challenging him.

"Crowmask, Sunflower, and Foxpaw were out marking the border when they were attacked," Maplefur explained, not seeming to notice the tension between his brother and Poisonedsap. "Foxpaw ran here for help. Me, Poisonedsap, and Timberstorm went, but..." He closed his eyes. "It was too late for Sunflower."

What? Milkblaze stared at his brother. *Then it wasn't Poisonedsap...* "Who attacked them?"

Before Maplefur could respond, Depthstar's yowl interrupted. Milkblaze turned to see that his leader had leaped onto the meeting rock. The clan quickly quieted and looked up at him anxiously.

"Cats of ShadowClan," Depthstar's voice was dry with grief. "As you

all know, Crowmask's patrol was attacked this morning by a rogue. Sunflower was killed." He paused and looked down toward the medicine den. "Crowmask, are you absolutely sure about the identity of this cat?"

The dark warrior's eyes were narrowed to slits. "I'm certain!" He hissed. "It was Deserve!"

There were several gasps of shock, mingled with angry snarls. *Deserve?* Milkblaze's heart skipped a beat, and he immediately looked back at Boost and Song. The two apprentices looked stunned, their eyes round with horror. Milkblaze quickly returned to their side, ready to defend them if the clan found a way to blame them.

"Deserve?" Greenpine blinked in disbelief. "He's a kit!"

"Not anymore!" Crowmask shot back. "He's only about the age of an older apprentice now. But believe me, he fights like a seasoned warrior."

Foxpaw stepped forward. "I never knew Deserve," He meowed, his amber eyes wide. "But that cat didn't seem like no apprentice to me!"

Is it just me, or does he seem... impressed? Milkblaze studied the apprentice, his fur prickling with unease. Perhaps by Deserve's fighting skills?

"I heard him before he killed Sunflower," Crowmask rose to his paws. "He targeted her to hurt Brownpaw and Blackpaw. And it's clear that he wants revenge on ShadowClan!"

Like Poisonedsap? Curious, Milkblaze looked toward her. She was watching the dark warrior, a thoughtful look on her face. *What is she thinking? Does she approve of what Deserve has done?*

"Deserve is alive..." Song whispered beside Milkblaze. He turned to see her eyes filled with emotion. "But... Why would he do this?"

Boost shook his head. "He's gone crazy."

Milkblaze leaned against Song and wrapped his tail around Boost, feeling a pang of sympathy. *This is so hard for them... They remember Deserve as their sweet and caring brother. Not a bloodthirsty killer.* To his relief, no cat questioned Boost or Song about their brother's crime.

Up on the meeting rock, Depthstar sighed, his tail drooping. "Deserve is a threat. But he's only one cat. We'll increase patrols, and if we encounter him again, we'll kill him." He looked down. "We will hold a vigil for Sunflower tonight." He leaped down from the rock silently.

As the clan began murmuring quietly to one another, Depthstar quietly approached his mate's body. He sat and stared down at it numbly. Brownpaw pressed his head against his father's shoulder, while Blackpaw rested his chin against Sunflower's flank.

Milkblaze blinked in surprise as Boost and Song left his side to join the family. The three looked at them uncertainly as they approached, but said nothing.

Song lowered her head respectfully before touching her nose to Sunflower's ear. "Thank you for taking care of us," She whispered. "I'm sorry we hurt you."

"Deserve took Snakekit from you," Boost murmured beside his sister. "But now you'll be united in StarClan."

As Boost finished speaking, Milkblaze noticed that Depthstar was watching the two apprentices, a thoughtful, numb look in his eyes. After a moment, he gave them a nod. *Trust.*

"Depthstar?"

Milkblaze stiffened as Poisonedsap approached the clan leader. Maplefur was at her side, their pelts brushing. He dug his claws into the ground. *I wish she'd stay away from him...*

"Yes, Poisonedsap?" Depthstar replied quietly, not removing his gaze from Sunflower's body.

The golden brown she-cat dipped her head. "I know that it's a bad

time, but... I have some news that might lighten the mood."

Depthstar twitched his tail, inviting her to continue. Poisonedsap exchanged a warm look with Maplefur, who looked ready to burst with excitement.

News? Milkblaze pricked his ears as he took a step toward them, studying the she-cat. What's going on? What does it have to do with Maplefur? His stomach churned. Have they decided to become mates?

Poisonedsap returned her gleaming amber gaze to Depthstar and spoke. "I'm expecting kits. Maplefur is the father."

Kits!? Her words stabbed Milkblaze in the throat like an icy thorn. His veins froze as shock seized his body. He felt sick as he watched the former rogue wrap her tail around his brother. *You've fallen into a trap, Maplefur... And now there's no escape.*

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As the moons passed by like falling leaves, Milkblaze tried to push his thoughts about Poisonedsap aside and focus on Boost and Song's training. But no matter how hard he tried, his fears only escalated.

Just over five moons ago, Poisonedsap had given birth to two kits: Stonekit and Swiftkit. The arrival of the kits had warmed the clan, and many saw it as a sign that Poisonedsap could in fact be trusted. Even Crowmask, who had spoken out against her for moons, seemed to have grown to respect her.

Two of Ashcloud and Greenpine's kits, Mottledface and Foxshadow, had become warriors. Their third son, Stripedpaw, had decided to continue his training alongside Boost and Song. Milkblaze could see clear as day that the tortoiseshell tom had a crush on Song. And she seemed to enjoy his company.

Milkblaze crouched by the fresh kill pile, chewing on a frog leg. Across the clearing outside the apprentices' den, he saw Stripedpaw and Song now, purring and giggling together. Not far from them, Boost rolled his eyes.

I was like Boost when I was his age. Milkblaze thought in amusement. *I still don't know how any cat could want a mate so young. But Stripedpaw and Song are so close, I wouldn't be surprised if they became mates after they're made warriors.*

Sunflower's kits, Blackstorm and Brownstripe, had become warriors. To everyone's surprise and relief, Deserve hadn't attacked any more patrols since killing Sunflower. *Perhaps she was the only one he wanted to kill.* Milkblaze had guessed. *Maybe he's gone far away now.*

However, it wasn't all good news for ShadowClan. Just a few moons ago, they had suffered a tragedy. Poppywing had bled to death while giving birth to her kit. Devastated, Rainheart had committed suicide by jumping into an occupied fox den- killed by the same fox that had killed Stormstar. *The fox that Poisonedsap brought here.* Milkblaze knew Poisonedsap hadn't intended for the fox to kill Rainheart. But it was still her fault that it was on their territory. *Another death because of her...*

Poppywing's surviving kit, Bloodkit, had been taken in by Rainheart's sister, Bloomfire, and her mate, Flameheart. The entire clan had agreed to hide the truth from Bloodkit, and let him believe that Bloomfire and Flameheart were his real parents. Their medicine cat, Hawkfeather, seemed certain that Bloodkit was a bad omen, and now every cat seemed suspicious of the little red tabby.

Milkblaze had seen Bloodkit around the camp occasionally with Maplefur's kit, Swiftkit. The look of fear and longing to belong was far too familiar to Milkblaze. He'd seen the same look on Boost and Song's faces for a moon. *Poor kit... He hasn't done any wrong.* Looking toward the nursery, he saw Bloodkit now, sitting close to Bloomfire's side and looking around nervously. *And things are harder for him now.*

A few days ago, Bloodkit and Swiftkit had been playing in the clearing when suddenly, the clan found Swiftkit with his pelt caught in the thorn barrier. Poisonedsap had been furious, claiming that Bloodkit pushed Swiftkit into the thorns. Though after Flameheart had a talk with Depthstar, the clan leader told the clan that this was not the case. It had been an accident.

Milkblaze found himself hating Poisonedsap even more now. *What does she have to gain by accusing Bloodkit of such things? Or is she really so protective of her kits?*

"Milkblaze?"

He flicked an ear and turned to see Maplefur padding toward him, his gaze low.

"Maplefur." He blinked at his brother. "Is everything okay?"

Maplefur paused in front of him and hesitated. He didn't meet his gaze, but Milkblaze could see the conflict and worry written clearly on his face. He looked over his shoulder toward the nursery, where Poisonedsap was watching Swiftkit and Stonekit play. After a long moment, Maplefur turned to face him again, his eyes deeply troubled. "I need to talk to you," He murmured. "Can we go into the forest?"

"Of course." Milkblaze blinked and stood. As he and Maplefur headed out of the camp, his concern grew for his brother. *What's going on? Is it Poisonedsap? If she's hurt him...* As they padded into the forest, another thought struck him. *Has she told him her plan? Does he know she's up to something?*

Maplefur paused by a twisted pine tree, raising his chin and staring up into the sky. The late afternoon sky gave his creamy fur a pale golden hue. Milkblaze watched him, his tail swishing slowly as he nervously waited for him to speak. After a long moment, Maplefur sighed and sat down, looking at his brother. "Poisonedsap has been... different lately."

Milkblaze's stomach twisted. "What do you mean?" He whispered.

The cream tabby hesitated. "She's teaching the kits in the nursery to fight. With tooth and claw." As Milkblaze's heart skipped a beat, he went on. "They're only kits, and they have nicked ears and scars!" He trembled a little as he spoke. "I don't want my kits to get hurt."

"What?" Milkblaze could hardly believe his ears. "How could she do such a thing?"

Maplefur shuffled his paws. "I guess kits fought like that in Bone Shred's gang," He murmured. "Maybe she thinks she's making them stronger. But it doesn't work like that in the clans. She doesn't understand that."

"Then make her understand!" Milkblaze growled, his heart pounding in concern.

"You think I haven't tried?" Maplefur met his gaze with wide anxious eyes. "She won't listen! She's acting completely different now. She..." He dug his claws into the ground. "She won't even let me see Swiftkit and Stonekit anymore. She wants me out of their lives."

Why? Milkblaze wondered as his anger boiled inside him. *Forcing her kits to fight? Wanting Maplefur out of the picture? What could she possibly be up to?*

"I sneak in to see Swiftkit at night when I can," Maplefur told him quietly. "But Stonekit... Stonekit is different. I see so much of Poisonedsap in him. And not in a good way." He paused. "He loves to fight. He doesn't seem to care about me at all. His only loyalty is to his mother. He's my kit, and I love him, but..." He looked down. "I want to get them away from Poisonedsap."

Milkblaze felt himself trembling with anger. *That fox hearted, crazy rogue! How dare she do this to Maplefur? How dare she hurt those kits?* "Poisonedsap has never belonged in this clan!"

Maplefur didn't respond. *He still has feelings for her!* Milkblaze realized in disbelief. *He still wants to trust her and believe that she has good inside her.* "She's still the mother of my kits," He murmured at last. "I'll talk to her again tomorrow."

Will he be able to change her mind? Milkblaze stared at his brother, his heart pounding with anxiety. "I'm worried about you... I don't want you to get hurt."

"It'll work out." Maplefur met his brother's gaze, and Milkblaze immediately saw the stress in his yellow eyes. "I won't let my kits be hurt."

Milkblaze leaned against his brother reassuringly, and it was quiet for a long moment. *I wish I knew how to help... But this is Maplefur's battle.* He gave him a lick on the ear. "Tomorrow Boost, Song, and Stripedpaw are being assessed," He meowed quietly. "Why don't you come along? We could use the help."

Maplefur looked thoughtful for a long moment. "You know, I'd like that." He decided. "It'll give me some time to think and gather the strength to face Poisonedsap." He blinked gratefully. "Thanks, Milkblaze. You're a great brother."

He nodded and watched as Maplefur padded away, his cream striped tail disappearing into the thorn tunnel. *Please be careful, Maplefur...* He thought numbly. *I don't think you know what you're dealing with. I'm not sure any of us do.*

***

Later that day, Milkblaze sat outside the warriors' den, reflecting on what he'd learned earlier. *Poisonedsap is training Swiftkit and Stonekit to fight... Why?* He looked toward the nursery occasionally, but tried not to make it too obvious in case Poisonedsap noticed. *Is she raising them to turn against ShadowClan?*

Outside the nursery, Swiftkit and Stonekit were tumbling around together, laughing and batting at each other. *They're acting like normal kits to me.* Milkblaze thought as he watched. *Maybe-*

"Ow!" Swiftkit suddenly cried and pulled away from his brother, reaching up and rubbing his ear. Milkblaze stiffened when he saw a droplet of crimson fall from his ear.

Stonekit snorted. "Don't be a baby!" He stalked toward his brother aggressively.

Without thinking, Milkblaze rose to his paws and quickly crossed the clearing. "Stonekit!"

The black legged kit paused and glared over his shoulder at Milkblaze, who froze for a heartbeat. *Those amber eyes, so much like Poisonedsap's...* "Did you hurt your brother?" He demanded.

Stonekit looked confused. "If he got hurt, it's because he was too stupid to move." He meowed. "Warriors fight with claws!" With a tiny growl, he launched himself at Milkblaze.

He gently pushed the kit back with one paw. "Warriors fight with courage and their hearts," He told him. "If you-"

"Milkblaze." Poisonedsap stepped out of the nursery, her eyes dark. Milkblaze met her gaze without hesitation. "What are you doing?"

A few moons ago, Milkblaze might have been hesitant to confront her. But now, he was ready to let her know that she was outnumbered. "I've seen the blood on those kits," He growled. "Why are you making them fight?"

For a moment, Poisonedsap didn't respond. Then her amber eyes narrowed. "I only want what's best for my kits, Milkblaze," She meowed calmly. "As a *father*, surely you can understand that?" She said the word "father" mockingly, infuriating him even more.

She said the word "father" mockingly, infuriating Milkblaze even more. "If you think you-"

"Milkblaze!"

Boost and Song hurried over to him, each pressing alongside him. "Tomorrow's the day!" Boost purred. "Our assessments!"

"I'm so excited!" Song added brightly. She looked from Milkblaze to Poisonedsap. "Oh, sorry! Were we interrupting something?"

To his surprise, Poisonedsap let out a purr. "Not at all, dear. Milkblaze was just leaving." She gave him a stern look.

Milkblaze narrowed his eyes. "Yes, I was." With that, he turned away, padding further into the clearing and looking over his shoulder. Poisonedsap guided her kits back into the nursery, glaring at him before disappearing into the shadows.

"Milkblaze?" Song stared at him, and he snapped his attention to her. "Is everything alright?"

"Do you think we'll pass?" Boost added, tilting his head.

Milkblaze pushed aside his anger to focus on his foster kits. "I know you will," He purred dryly and touched noses with each of them. "You'll be the best warriors in ShadowClan." As the apprentices purred, he thought about what he'd just seen.

Maplefur was right. Stonekit is so aggressive, so much like his mother... He worried about the little tom's future. He needs a mentor who will teach him how to be a true warrior. Not whatever Poisonedsap is turning him into. He blinked thoughtfully and looked toward Depthstar's den. Maybe...

"I need to go speak with Depthstar," Milkblaze told the apprentices, stepping back. "It's almost sundown. Make sure you're both rested up for tomorrow."

Boost and Song mewed their agreement, their eyes bright as they turned away. *I've helped those kits become great warriors.* Milkblaze watched them head to the fresh kill pile, then returned his attention to the leaders' den. *Now it's time for me to help Stonekit.*

Milkblaze padded over to Depthstar's den and paused, raising a forepaw and briefly scratching at the outer wall of the den. A moment later, his leader spoke. "Come in."

When he entered, Depthstar was sitting in his nest. "How can I help you, Milkblaze?"

"Depthstar," Milkblaze dipped his head as he stepped inside. "I was wondering when Poisonedsap's kits are being apprenticed."

"They're six moons old now, aren't they?" The clan leader meowed. "I think I'll apprentice them tomorrow. Why do you ask?"

This is perfect. Milkblaze thought. *Tomorrow will be Boost's assessment. I'll be able to take another apprentice.* "If it's alright with you, I would like to mentor Stonekit."

Depthstar blinked in surprise. "You're already mentoring Boost."

"He'll be completing his training tomorrow," Milkblaze reminded

him.

The dark blue-gray tom looked thoughtful. "You'd be taking on a new apprentice immediately after Boost. Are you sure you wouldn't prefer a break?"

"I'm sure," Milkblaze meowed. *Stonekit needs me.* "I like being a mentor, and Stonekit has the makings of a great warrior." He just needs someone to set his paws on the right path.

Depthstar nodded. "If you're sure, Milkblaze. You may mentor Stonekit when the time comes."

He blinked gratefully, feeling some of his stress lifted. "Thank you, Depthstar." His leader flicked his tail to dismiss him, and he turned away. *I'm looking forward to this.* He thought as he stepped out of the den. *Stonekit is a strong young cat. And he's my nephew. I'll make sure he-*

"Milkblaze."

He stopped a heartbeat before he crashed into Poisonedsap. The queen stood before him, her dark amber eyes blazing with anger. *She overheard me.* "You will *not* mentor either of my kits."

Milkblaze narrowed his eyes. "Yes, I will," He growled. "Depthstar has already agreed to it."

"So?" A growl rumbled in her throat. "I will not allow Stonekit to be weakened." Her ragged tail lashed slowly. "Especially by kin of his father."

Fixing the she-cat with a dark stare, he leaned closer, pushing away his fear. "I don't know what game you're playing, Poisonedsap," He growled. "But you're not going to win."

Poisonedsap's eyes burned into his. The tension between them felt like a wall of smoke. After several heartbeats, the queen grinned, revealing sharp white teeth. "Watch me."

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Milkblaze woke to the first light of dawn fading through the branches of the warriors' den. His body longed to continue sleeping, but he refused and pulled himself to his paws. *It's time for the apprentices to be assessed.* He yawned and arched his back in a stretch, then turned toward Maplefur's nest to wake him.

The nest was empty. Milkblaze blinked away sleep. *He must be in the clearing already.* Flameheart was absent from his nest as well. Spotting Copperstripe, he weaved through the sleeping cats until he reached the tabby's side, prodding him with a paw.

"Hmm?" The young warrior mumbled.

"It's dawn," Milkblaze told him. "Time to assess the apprentices." As Copperstripe yawned and rose to his paws, he turned and exited the den.

The clearing was quiet and chilly this early in the morning. Flameheart stood near the thorn tunnel with Song, Boost, and Stripedpaw, who all looked ready to burst with excitement. *Maplefur isn't here?*

As Milkblaze joined the group, Boost turned to him brightly. "You're awake!" He purred.

"Can we go now?" Song added hopefully as Copperstripe stepped to Milkblaze's side.

"I'd say so." Flameheart looked to the warriors. "Are we ready?"

"Hold on." Milkblaze looked around the clearing. "Where is Maplefur? He's going to help assess them."

Flameheart frowned. "I haven't seen Maplefur yet today. Is he still asleep?"

"He wasn't in his nest," He replied, worry for his brother sinking in as he thought about this. Where else could he be?

Stripedpaw blinked. "Maybe he's in the dirtplace?"

"Or out hunting or getting a drink," Copperstripe added, looking to

the apprentices. "Maybe he changed his mind. We should go."

Maplefur was looking forward to this! It's going to help him relax before he confronts Poisonedsap again. "Let's wait a bit," He suggested, worry in his tone. "I'm sure Maplefur won't be much longer."

The other cats hesitated, but nodded and murmured agreement. Time seemed to stand still as Milkblaze sat, his gaze flicking around as every once in a while, a couple of his clanmates slowly emerged from their dens, ready to start the day. But there was no sign of Maplefur. *It isn't like him to be late, or away from camp like this...* Moment by moment, he grew more worried. *Come on, Maplefur! Where are you?*

Copperstripe was grooming himself, licking a paw and swiping at his ear while Flameheart sat, looking patient, but his twitching tail tip revealed otherwise. Boost, Song, Stripedpaw were still in good spirits, laughing quietly as they showed off their hunting crouches and leaps.

At last, Flameheart rose to his paws. "I don't think Maplefur is coming, Milkblaze," He meowed. "He must be busy."

As the ginger tabby spoke, the apprentices shot over to them, their eyes sparkling eagerly. "So we can go now?" Boost asked.

"Please, it's been forever!" Song begged eagerly.

Milkblaze wanted to object, but seeing the excited looks on the young cats' faces, he knew he couldn't make them wait any longer. He let out a sigh. "Alright, we can go."

"Yay!" Boost and Song shot out of the camp with Stripedpaw hot on their tails. "Race you there!"

While Copperstripe hurried after the trio, Flameheart padded alongside Milkblaze, looking at him sympathetically. "If Maplefur really wants to come, he'll catch up."

"I suppose." Milkblaze looked over his shoulder once more in hopes that Maplefur had appeared. But his brother was nowhere to be seen. With a quiet sigh, he looked away and padded into the forest.

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The assessment went very well. Song had impressed every cat when she'd caught a huge thrush with a mighty leap into the air, but none more than Stripedpaw. Admiration sparkled in his eyes whenever he saw the white she-cat. He himself had caught three frogs, and Boost had skillfully hunted a couple birds and a frog.

Milkblaze found himself distracted the entire morning, his thoughts occupied with Maplefur's disappearance. *Why wasn't he in the camp this morning? Where could he have gone? Why didn't he come for the assessment? It's so unlike him.* A chill ran down his spine as a terrible thought struck him. *Poisonedsap... What if...* He gave himself a shake. *No. She wouldn't just kill Maplefur like that. You're being paranoid.*

"So we passed?" Song asked anxiously as the group padded back toward the camp. "Really?"

"You all passed!" Flameheart purred and flicked Stripedpaw on the shoulder. "You all did excellent."

Copperstripe nodded. "You really mastered everything we taught you. You should be proud."

Milkblaze padded at the back of the group, his mind still filled with questions. *Maplefur must be back at camp by now, right? The sun has risen. Has any other cat noticed-*

"Milkblaze?"

He paused and looked up. Boost and Song were staring at them, uncertainty flickering in their eyes. "Are you proud of us?" Song asked.

With a flash of guilt, Milkblaze realized he'd been so distracted by Maplefur, he'd forgotten to praise his own foster kits."Oh, yes!" He exclaimed. "Of course. I couldn't be more proud of you two. You'll be great warriors."

The two purred before Stripedpaw gave Song a nudge. "Race you to the camp!" He exclaimed before dashing through the trees.

The white she-cat laughed and shot after him. "You're on!"

Flameheart chuckled. "We'd better catch up." He and Copperstripe hurried after the apprentices.

Milkblaze looked at Boost, who watched his sister disappear into the trees. "You don't feel like racing today?"

The young tabby purred. "Nah, my legs are sore from all that hunting." As they padded toward the camp side by side, Boost looked at him worriedly. "Are you okay?"

He hesitated. "I'm fine." *I will be when I return to camp and see Maplefur...*

***

"I, Depthstar, leader of ShadowClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these three apprentices."

Milkblaze sat beside Copperstripe, looking up at his clan leader as he spoke. Boost, Song, and Stripedpaw stood at the base of the meeting rock, their tails high. Milkblaze was infinitely proud of them. But his feelings of pride toward his kits was clashing with a sickening fear.

Maplefur was still nowhere to be seen. They'd reported this to Cobratail when they returned. The deputy guessed he was out hunting, but Milkblaze doubted it. *Why would he be out hunting alone for so long? Why wouldn't he come to assess the apprentices? Something isn't right.*

He eased out of his thoughts as Depthstar went on. "Stripedpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your clan, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do," The young tom responded.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name," Depthstar meowed. "Stripedpaw, from this moment you will be known as Stripednose."

"Stripednose! Stripednose!" The clan cheered, and Milkblaze joined in more quietly, occasionally looking over his shoulder and scanning the crowd for Maplefur.

"Milkblaze?" Rosebreeze whispered as she leaned in beside him. "Where's Maplefur? His kits are being apprenticed soon, and he's nowhere to be seen!"

The kits! Milkblaze remembered. He looked toward the nursery and saw Poisonedsap sitting outside with her two kits at her paws, her eyes gleaming. Stonekit looked eager and restless, while Swiftkit stared at his paws. *Maplefur would never miss this.* He watched Poisonedsap through narrowed eyes. *And she doesn't seem the least bit concerned.*

"Boost, Song." As Depthstar spoke their names, Milkblaze returned his attention to the front of the clearing. "You joined ShadowClan as rogues and chose not to take clan names when you were apprenticed. Do you wish to take warrior names?"

Boost and Song exchanged a look, and Milkblaze wondered how they would respond. Then Boost dipped his head respectfully. "I wish to keep my name, Depthstar. I like being called Boost. It was the name my mother gave me. I cannot give it up."

Milkblaze blinked proudly at his apprentice as Depthstar nodded. "Very well. Song?"

She hesitated and looked at Stripednose. "Would you mind?" She asked quietly.

Stripednose's eyes shone. "Of course not. I love you no matter what you're called." The two cats leaned together purring, and Milkblaze's heart warmed as he watched them. *They'll make a good couple.*

The two young cats broke apart as Depthstar coughed and went on. "Now then. Boost, Song, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your clan, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do," Both cats meowed.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I name you both warriors."

Depthstar dipped his head. "StarClan honors your determination and enthusiasm, and we welcome you as full warriors of ShadowClan."

"Boost! Song!"

As the clan cheered, Milkblaze gazed at the two cats, overwhelmed with emotion. It feels like yesterday they were tiny kits, afraid and heartbroken. And now look at them. Warriors accepted by their clan!

As Depthstar leaped down from the rock to rest his chin on each new warriors' head, Rosebreeze gave Milkblaze an affectionate nudge. "It's thanks to you, you know," She murmured. "You raised them well."

Milkblaze purred gratefully to his sister, and in that moment, his concern for Maplefur was replaced by fatherly pride. *I raised those kits as my own, and they've grown into smart, skilled, brave warriors. He raised his voice above the rest.* "Song! Boost!" The siblings looked back at him, their eyes blazing with joy.

"Now it's also time for two kits to begin their training." Depthstar took his place on the meeting rock again as the new warriors stepped aside, mewing excitedly to each other. Song playfully batted Stripednose on the nose, teasing him about his name. The tortoiseshell tom purred and licked her cheek.

Milkblaze watched Stonekit race through the crowd to the foot of the rock, looking up at the clan leader with his tail high. Where's Swiftkit? He looked over his shoulder, surprised to see the black and white kit following more slowly, his head low. *What's wrong with him? KIts are always ready to explode when they become apprentices!* He looked around again. *And where is Maplefur? He would never miss their ceremony!*

When Swiftkit reached his brother's side, Depthstar spoke. "Swiftkit, Stonekit, you have reached the age of six moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed. Swiftkit, from this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Swiftpaw."

As Swiftpaw's tail flicked slowly, Depthstar looked into the crowd. "Timberstorm, you are ready to take on an apprentice. You had received excellent training from Crowmask, and you have shown yourself to be wise and loyal. I expect you to pass on all you know to Swiftpaw."

As the black and white kit touched noses with Timberstorm, Milkblaze glanced over his shoulder at Poisonedsap. The queen was nodding in approval. He remembered how just yesterday she'd confronted him, claiming that she would not let him mentor Stonekit.

As the clan cheered Swiftpaw's name, Milkblaze narrowed his eyes at the queen. *I will be mentoring Stonekit and turning him into a great warrior. And there's nothing you can do to stop me.* Poisonedsap met his gaze, her amber eyes glittering.

"Now," Depthstar began. "Stonekit-"

"Depthstar! Depthstar!"

Milkblaze twitched an ear at the alarmed yowls. He and every other cat looked toward the thorn tunnel in surprise, many rising to their paws and murmuring worriedly to one another. Ashcloud and Blackstorm suddenly burst into the camp, panting as they caught their breath.

"Ashcloud? Blackstorm?" Depthstar's blue eyes were fixed worriedly on the two warriors. "What is it?"

What's going on? Milkblaze stared at the warriors as they caught their breath, his heartbeat quickening nervously. *Why did they run so far, so fast?* A horrible thought struck him. *Oh StarClan, is it Maplefur? No... No, it can't be. Maplefur is fine. Maybe some cat has crossed the border, or-*

"It's Maplefur."

Blackstorm's words struck Milkblaze like a bolt of lightning, igniting flames of fear inside him. His heart galloped as he stood frozen, his breath caught in his throat as the dark warrior spoke again.

"He's dead!"

Chapter 7

The world stood still as Milkblaze stared at Blackstorm, his paws frozen to the ground. The gasps and cries around him seemed faint and distant as he processed his words. *Maplefur... Is dead? No... Oh StarClan, please no!*

Beyond Blackstorm and Ashcloud, a third warrior, Cougarfoot, emerged from the shadows of the thorn tunnel, carrying a familiar cream tabby on his shoulders. The sight of it sent a flurry of horror into Milkblaze. *Maplefur!* He forced himself to take a few trembling steps toward the newcomers, vaguely aware of Rosebreeze wailing out behind him in distress.

"No!"

A screech broke him out of his stunned daze, and he blinked as Poisonedsap slammed into him, nearly knocking him off his paws. "Get out of my way!" She spat, proceeding to thrust Rosebreeze aside.

Milkblaze was too shocked to be angry with her. He regained his balance as Cougarfoot carefully lowered Maplefur's body to the ground, and Poisonedsap wailed, dropping to his side and pressing her muzzle into his fur.

Forcing himself to draw closer, he stared down at his beloved brother, half expecting him to look up and greet him. But Maplefur didn't move. He felt sick to his stomach as his eyes fixed on the ragged wound across his throat, his cream fur clotted with dry blood. Yellow eyes stared up at Milkblaze, blank and frozen. Milkblaze stared back. *If only those eyes could tell me what he saw in his final moments... Who did this to him.*

Suddenly a black tail moved across Maplefur's face, and Milkblaze raised his gaze to see that Blackstorm was gently closing his eyelids with his tail. *I'll never see my brother's eyes again.*

"Don't touch him!" Poisonedsap looked up and spat. Blackstorm dipped his head respectfully and stepped back. *He wasn't doing any wrong...*

"Cougarfoot."

Milkblaze heard Depthstar slowly joining them beside the dead warrior. "What happened?

"Cougarfoot," Depthstar padded over to the others slowly, stopping near the dead warrior. "What happened?"

Milkblaze dragged his gaze away from Maplefur to Cougarfoot, anxiously awaiting his words. What happened to him? Who killed him?

Cougarfoot sat and stared down at the body. "We were patrolling by the ThunderClan border, and... We found him, just a fox length into their territory. His body was cold. There's ThunderClan scent all over him."

ThunderClan? Milkblaze blinked in confusion as Poisonedsap raised her head and snarled. "A ThunderClan warrior killed my mate!"

He looked around in disbelief as the clan rose into yowls of rage, shouting insults toward ThunderClan. *This makes no sense! Why would Maplefur be near the border alone? And why would a ThunderClan cat go as far as to kill him?*

"Enough!" Depthstar raised his voice, and the cats quieted. "We have no proof that-"

"Proof?" Poisonedsap glared at the clan leader. "Maplefur was found right on their land! There's ThunderClan scent on him! Clearly this is the work of ThunderClan!"

Depthstar narrowed his blue eyes. "What reason would ThunderClan have to kill Maplefur?"

"What reason do you have to not defend his honor?" Poisonedsap shot back. "Maplefur died at the paws of a ThunderClan warrior! We must attack at once!"

As she spoke, Depthstar bristled. "We will not attack ThunderClan until-"

Before he could finish, Poisonedsap rose to her paws, swinging to face the ShadowClan leader. "What kind of a leader are you to let cats get away with murder?" She spat. "Have you no honor?"

Milkblaze stared at the queen in astonishment. *How can she speak to the clan leader like that?!* He studied her as she glared at Depthstar, her tail lashing slowly. *She's so ready to accept that ThunderClan killed Maplefur, but it makes no sense! Unless...* He remembered his earlier suspicions with a chill of dread. *Unless she's setting them up... And she's the one responsible...*

He heard yowls of agreement from his clanmates, but hardly noticed, his attention locked on the former rogue as his mind spun. *Maplefur knew that Poisonedsap was training Swiftkit and Stonekit to fight. If she thought he'd get in the way, or report it to Depthstar...*

As Milkblaze's thoughts raced, Depthstar faced Poisonedsap calmly, breathing in. "You're in grief, Poisonedsap," He meowed. "I understand. I will confront Strawberrystar with this accusation at the next gathering."

Poisonedsap bristled. "The next gathering? That's-"

Cougarfoot stepped to her side. "Depthstar knows what he's doing," He meowed quietly. "Maplefur will be avenged. I promise."

The queen glared at the golden tom, and Milkblaze waited for her to snap at him like she did Blackstorm and Depthstar. But she calmed and leaned against him. "I suppose. Thank you for bringing him back to camp, Cougarfoot."

Milkblaze stared at Poisonedsap in disbelief as she rubbed her head against Cougarfoot's shoulder. *She just wailed over Maplefur and demanded he be avenged... And now she's leaning on another tom, like they're mates? Moments after learning Maplefur died?*

After a moment, Poisonedsap returned her gaze to Depthstar, looking as calm as ever. "May we continue with Stonekit's

ceremony?" She rasped.

Depthstar frowned. "Surely we should hold Maplefur's vigil first-"

"No," She interrupted, lashing her tail. "Stonekit must be made an apprentice now, with his brother. That's what Maplefur would want." A warm look flashed in her eyes as she said this.

Milkblaze's suspicions rose. *This was an act... She's pretended to grieve for Maplefur. No cat gets over the death of a loved one so quickly!*

Depthstar himself seemed surprised at her willingness to continue the ceremony. But after a moment, he dipped his head. "Very well."

As the clan slowly returned their focus on the ceremony, many still shaken at the news of Maplefur's death, Milkblaze looked at the kits with a pang of sympathy. Swiftpaw was staring at his paws, his head low and ears flat. Beside him, Stonekit was hunched over, though his tail swished slowly. *How is he processing this? I guess I'll find out soon.* He drew in a shaky breath. *Stonekit will be my apprentice.*

"Stonekit," Depthstar began. "From this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as-"

"Wait!" Stonekit looked up and yowled.

What is he doing? Milkblaze blinked at the kit in surprise. It isn't right to interrupt a ceremony like that. Swiftpaw himself looked startled.

Depthstar looked surprised, but nodded. "Yes, Stonekit?"

The black-legged kit straightened, his eyes raised to his leader. "My father has died wrongfully at the paws of a rival warrior," He meowed, and Milkblaze was impressed by his mature words. "I wish to avenge him. I will find the ThunderClan warrior who sent him to StarClan and tear him apart." His amber eyes narrowed. "I would like to be called Revengepaw. For I will act out my revenge. For my father."

Revengepaw? Milkblaze's heart skipped a beat as he stared at the

white and black tom. Why in the name of StarClan would he want a threatening name like that? He shot a look toward Poisonedsap. The queen was gazing at her son proudly, her eyes glittering. Maplefur told me that Stonekit didn't seem to care about him. I'll bet my claws Poisonedsap has something to do with this...

Curious, Milkblaze looked up at Depthstar. The clan leader was exchanging a startled look with Cobratail. "That's a worrisome name, Stonekit," He meowed as he returned his attention to the kit. "One that may give a poor impression to your clanmates. To the other clans. It may make them wary of you."

"It is the name that will give me strength." Stonekit replied, clearly having no doubts.

Depthstar studied him for a long moment. "Very well." He decided. "From this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Revengepaw."

Alright... Milkblaze felt unsettled as he looked at Stonekit- no, Revengepaw. *It's certainly a different decision. I'll ask him about it while I'm showing him the territory.* He rose to his paws, starting to make his way through the crowd toward Revengepaw as Depthstar spoke.

Your mentor will be-"

"Depthstar." Poisonedsap spoke suddenly. "I have a request."

What? Milkblaze stopped and looked over his shoulder at the she-cat, suspicion prickling his fur. *She told me she wouldn't let me mentor Revengepaw. But surely she has no power over that now?*

Up on the meeting rock, Depthstar looked irritated at yet another interruption. "Yes, Poisonedsap?"

Poisonedsap raised her voice. "I would like Cougarfoot to mentor Revengepaw," She meowed.

As Cougarfoot looked at her in surprise, Milkblaze stared at her in bewilderment. *What is she meowing about? Does she think she has any right to decide who her kits' mentors will be?* He glared over his

shoulder at her. *I'm mentoring Revengepaw!*

Depthstar's ear twitched. "Cougarfoot already has an apprentice."

That's right. Milkblaze narrowed his eyes at her. *Nice try.*

Poisonedsap snorted. "Mottledpaw is being assessed tomorrow." She cast Cougarfoot a warm look. "Surely a strong, handsome warrior like Cougarfoot can handle two apprentices for one day?"

Cougarfoot twitched his tail and ducked his head, clearly flattered at her praise. "I suppose I could."

The ShadowClan leader hesitated, catching Milkblaze's eye. He stared back. *No. You promised that I would mentor Revengepaw. Poisonedsap is setting him down a dark path, I just know it! Put him in my paws, and I'll make sure that doesn't happen!*

But Depthstar looked helpless, and Milkblaze could understand how it must feel being in his position. Poisonedsap has just lost her mate, and she wasn't too satisfied with Depthstar's decision to wait until the gathering to confront ThunderClan. *How will he look to the clan if he denies a grieving queen's request?*

Depthstar blinked apologetically to Milkblaze before he spoke. "Very well. Cougarfoot, you will mentor Revengepaw. I expect you to pass on all you know to him."

Milkblaze's jaw dropped. He stared in disbelief as Cougarfoot left Poisonedsap's side to touch noses with Revengepaw. *I can't believe this!* He swung his head toward Poisonedsap as the clan cheered.

"Revengepaw! Revengepaw!"

Milkblaze's head ached as he glared through the crowd at Poisonedsap. *You...* She was gazing at Cougarfoot, nodding in satisfaction. *You did this!* As if she heard his thoughts, she suddenly rested her gaze on him. Her amber eyes flickered with something unreadable before she smirked.

Fury pulsed through Milkblaze's head. *You heartless, cruel, wicked cat... You've ruined my chance to free Revengepaw from your trap. I can*

see right through your act. He stared her down without fear, hoping she could feel his hatred scorching through her smirking face like fire. *I know that you've done this. You killed my brother. And you won't get away with it.*

***

That night, Maplefur's body lay in the center of the clearing, his cream striped pelt pale in the moonlight. Hawkfeather and Dewstorm had smoothed his fur with herbs, and the reek of death was masked by the sweet scent of flowers.

Milkblaze's eyes were closed as he pressed his nose into his brother's flank. His body was ice cold, so unlike the warmth he'd felt when he leaned against him in the forest just yesterday. Rosebreeze crouched at his side, her chin rested over Maplefur's shoulder.

Maplefur... I'm so sorry. He thought as he squeezed his eyes shut, holding back tears. *You didn't deserve this. You just wanted to help her to feel safe in the clan. You just wanted to be a great father.*

The sound of faint pawsteps broke him out of his thoughts, and he raised his head slightly to see Diamondrain approaching slowly from the nursery. "May I join you?" She asked quietly. "He was my mentor."

Milkblaze gave a tiny nod. As the she-cat lowered and gave Maplefur's shoulder a lick, he stared past her to the warriors' den, his chest growing heavy with grief and rising anger. *Diamondrain was his apprentice, and she came to the vigil once her kits were asleep. Poisonedsap was his mate, and she's in there having the best sleep she's had in moons.*

A moment later, another cat dropped to Milkblaze's side. He glanced over, half expecting to see Poisonedsap. But instead, it was Swiftpaw. The young apprentice pressed his head against his father's side, a sob of grief escaping him. "It's my fault..."

"Swiftpaw..." Milkblaze's heart broke for his nephew. *He's so young to lose his father.* He leaned closer to him. Swiftpaw turned and thrust his head under Milkblaze's chin, crying quietly. Milkblaze

wrapped his tail around him and closed his eyes. "How could it be your fault?" He murmured.

The black and white apprentice didn't speak for a long while. "I-I don't know..." He rasped at last.

Milkblaze didn't press him any further. He lowered his head to Maplefur's body as Swiftpaw leaned into him, trembling. Milkblaze closed his eyes, grief and anger sending determination through him. *Poisonedsap won't get away with this, Maplefur... I promise.*

***

A quarter moon went by. The world felt strange and cold without Maplefur. Depthstar had kept his promise to Poisonedsap. At the gathering, he had openly accused ThunderClan of murdering Maplefur. Strawberrystar had furiously denied the accusation, and many ShadowClan cats thought she was lying, or didn't know one of her warriors was a killer.

Every day now, Milkblaze felt sick to his stomach at the sight of Poisonedsap in the clearing, flirting with Cougarfoot every chance she got. She already had the warrior wrapped around her paw. *She'll use him for something, just like she did Maplefur.*

Poisonedsap spent a strange amount of time with one particular group of cats: Mottledface, Foxshadow, Blackstorm, Revengepaw, and Swiftpaw. Milkblaze had come to the conclusion that whatever she had planned, some of his clanmates were involved.

So how do I know who to trust? Milkblaze wondered anxiously. He sat at the side of the clearing, his head low. It was a chilly day, but he hardly noticed. Though it was after sunhigh, the sky was dim and gray. *A storm is coming.*

Poisonedsap killed Maplefur. She lured a fox onto our territory to kill Stormstar. And yet neither is enough. She's still planning something. She's made allies within ShadowClan. Milkblaze stared across the clearing through dull eyes.

Poisonedsap was sitting with her usual companions. Revengepaw

swung a black paw into the air, slashing at some invisible enemy. As Foxshadow and Mottledface laughed, Poisonedsap nodded approvingly.

"Milkblaze?"

He didn't move as Boost and Song padded up to him. After a moment, he blinked slowly and rested his gaze on them. *My kits...* They were fully grown warriors now. Boost lean and handsome, and Song beautiful and intelligent. *They've grown so much.*

"Are you okay?" Song asked, her blue eyes filled with concern. "You haven't been yourself."

He looked down. "I... I'm okay."

"You must miss Maplefur," Boost meowed quietly. "We understand how it feels." He moved closer and leaned against him, and Song pressed on Milkblaze's opposite side.

"You were there for us," Song murmured. "So we're here for you."

Emotion swelled through Milkblaze's heart. He closed his eyes, finding comfort in the warmth of his foster kits. "Thank you," He murmured.

After a long while, the two warriors sat in front of him. "Is there anything you want to talk about? Boost asked. "You can tell us."

Milkblaze stared at Boost and Song as they gazed at him, their eyes glistening with concern and undeniable love. *They have no idea about Poisonedsap... And if I tell them, Poisonedsap might find out and go after them. They're in danger. The whole clan is. I need to protect them.*

"I'm alright," He murmured after a long moment. Suddenly, he realized something. *As long as Poisonedsap can tell I'm a threat... My days are numbered...* "I'm so proud of you both, you know?"

"We know." Song's eyes shone.

Milkblaze leaned forward and touched noses with the white she-cat,

then did the same to Boost. "I love you."

"We love you too, Milkblaze." Boost gave his shoulder a lick. "Everything's going to be okay."

I hope so. A droplet of rain fell onto his nose, and he realized it had begun sprinkling.

"The rain might pick up soon," Cobratail was meowing across the clearing. "Be ready to take shelter!"

Movement caught Milkblaze's eye. He looked past Boost and Song and saw that Poisonedsap had turned away from her allies. He expected her to take shelter in the warriors' den, but instead, she headed toward the thorn tunnel. She paused, glancing over her shoulder briefly before slipping out of the camp.

Where is she going? Milkblaze narrowed his eyes as he stared at the tunnel where she'd disappeared. *And why is she acting so suspicious?* He rose to his paws. *I'll follow her.* He decided firmly. I'll find out what she's up to."

As he started forward, Boost blinked. "Where are you going?"

"Err, hunting," Milkblaze meowed, not taking his eyes off the thorn tunnel. "There will be more frogs out in this weather. I'll see you later, okay?"

"Okay." Song replied, and Milkblaze padded across the camp and through the thorn tunnel.

As he stepped into the damp forest, he became aware of the rain falling more quickly. *Oh StarClan, this is going to be a downpour.* He thought miserably. *At least Poisonedsap won't scent me.* He spotted her ragged tail vanish behind a tree a ways away, and he immediately headed in that direction.

Rain pattered at the earth as Milkblaze quickened his pace through the dark woods, his eyes fixed on the dark silhouette of Poisonedsap up ahead. *I can't lose her.* He pressed onward as rain chilled his fur, keeping a careful distance between himself and Poisonedsap. *Where is she going? We're nearing the edge of the territory.*

Milkblaze paused behind the damp trunk of a pine tree and peered out. Up ahead just past the border, Poisonedsap stood, her ears flattened as rain fell onto her, slicking her brown fur to her body. But she didn't move or make any attempt to find shelter.

Is she waiting for something? Someone? Milkblaze blinked in confusion as he lowered himself to the ground, ignoring the mud seeping into his belly fur. Poisonedsap remained still. Suddenly the dark shape of a cat appeared from the bushes beyond her. She pricked her ears as the dark cat stepped forward to meet her, his white paws wet with mud.

Milkblaze's breath caught in his throat. Thunder crackled overhead as lightning lit up the sky, outlining the newcomer in a pale glow for a split second. He recognized that cat. Though he remembered him as a tiny kit. Now, he was fully grown, muscles rippling under his black fur. *Great StarClan, it's-*

"Deserve!" Poisonedsap grunted. "About time you showed up. I'll be a soaked rat by the time I get back to my nest!"

The black tom twitched his ear. "The state of your pelt isn't my concern," He growled. "You said you had news. What is it?"

"Maplefur is dead," She told him. "I killed him last moon. I couldn't trust him to... *contribute* anymore." Her eyes narrowed. "But I've found a new mate to provide more kits for the army."

"Good." A purr rumbled in Deserve's throat. "Deserve's Army will need as many cats as possible for our attack. Your kits seem like a promising addition to our cause."

Deserve's Army? Milkblaze could hardly believe his ears as he listened. *Attack?* Though he'd been certain about Poisonedsap being a threat for moons, hearing it right in front of him felt unreal. ShadowClan is in danger! More than I could have ever imagined!

"Bring Revengepaw and Swiftpaw to our meeting next moon," Deserve meowed. "I look forward to meeting them."

"They look forward to meeting you." Poisonedsap dipped her head.

Deserve nodded and turned away, disappearing into the rain. The queen stood, watching him leave.

Anger burned through Milkblaze as he stared at the she-cat. You killed Maplefur. You're plotting with this murderer to attack the clan! As thunder echoed through the sky, he pulled himself out of his hiding place, his eyes narrowed. Poisonedsap still had her back to him.

I can kill her right now. I can avenge Maplefur, Stormstar, and stop her from destroying our clan! Resisting the urge to yowl, he surged forward through the rain, leaping at Poisonedsap with his claws outstretched. *It's over!*

Just as his claws touched her pelt, she spun, slashing her forepaws into his shoulder. Milkblaze let out a startled yowl as he was slammed into the ground, mud splashing against the side of his face. He looked up to see Poisonedsap's amber eyes glowing down at him, her claws digging into his shoulders.

"Well, well, Milkblaze," She sneered. "I thought you might become a problem."

Despite being pinned by a murderer, Milkblaze felt no fear. Only radiating hatred and fury. "You killed my brother!" He snarled up at her. "You fox hearted peace of dung!" He summoned all his strength and kicked out with his hind legs.

Poisonedsap hissed as she was flung backwards, staggering as Milkblaze hauled himself to his paws, mud plastering his fur to his thin body. The downpour had begun, battering onto their backs like cold stones. Thunder growled across the gray sky as he panted, glaring at his rival. "You killed Maplefur, *and* Stormstar! You have no place in ShadowClan!" He unsheathed his muddy claws. "You're going to pay for it!"

"You're too smart for your own good," Poisonedsap commented, her ragged tail dripping mud. "You should have minded your own business." Her eyes flicked to his throat, and she bared her teeth and lunged for him.

Milkblaze shot back as her teeth snapped shut, ripping out a tuft of white fur from his throat. He swung his claws at her shoulder, satisfied when he felt them tear through skin. She yowled angrily and grabbed his scruff, throwing him aside.

Thunder crackled above as his head collided with a tree, pain echoing through his skull. Milkblaze groaned as he slumped against the damp trunk, shaking rain from his eyelids. Poisonedsap stalked toward him, her amber eyes dark with fury.

He was freezing and exhausted, but thinking of Maplefur gave him the energy to fight. With a snarl, he lunged forward, digging his claws into her sides as he fastened his teeth into her neck. Poisonedsap screeched and grappled with him as they rolled across the mud, but Milkblaze didn't let go. *I'm fighting for my life now. I'm fighting for Maplefur. I'm fighting for ShadowClan!*

She ripped free, and Milkblaze spat out her fur, tasting blood. *You're putting every cat I care about in danger!* Poisonedsap scored her claws down Milkblaze's neck, and he yowled in pain, coughing up a droplet of blood. *Maplefur, are you watching? This is for you.*

Lightning flashed across his vision as he hit the ground, mud seeping into his fur. Poisonedsap dug her claws into his shoulders, glaring down at him. *Is this what you saw in your final moments too, Maplefur? Is this how it ends?*

As heavy rain pattered at his face, thunder roared above them. Poisonedsap lunged down at his throat, and he yowled as her teeth pierced his flesh. *Yes, it is. It's over.* He desperately scrabbled at her with muddy, torn claws, but she only crunched down harder. *It's over for me.* The taste of blood grew in Milkblaze's throat, and he choked, unable to breathe. *But not for you. You won't get away with this.*

The world grew fuzzy around Milkblaze as he stared up at Poisonedsap, who raised her head, smirking down at him. Blood pooled around her muzzle. *You never will.* His throat felt hot. As everything went dark, Milkblaze had one final thought. *You can destroy me. But you will never destroy ShadowClan.*

THE END